

Umbra

By: Storm Humbert

Part I

Prologue

Xin Lee looked up at Aryana's big eyes that were as blue as the ocean behind her. Those eyes were a rare thing in China, especially in his small village near Linyi, in the Shandong Province. The village was about forty miles south of Jinan. They didn't get nearly as many exchange students as the cities, but it was early and the beach was beautiful and not too crowded yet. She was the only one he wanted. She was tall for a girl, at least a local girl, with long legs and a face for smiling. Her black hair curled as it fell, and she always moved like she knew everyone was watching.

He could only piece together the bare meaning of her sentences, but she seemed to think that it was nice that he tried so hard; just as he appreciated her patience with his broken English – though they had both decided that his should be called “shattered” English. He did not mind; the world should learn Chinese anyway. There were more of them after all; more than once he had suggested, to his English teacher, that it should be put to a global vote. His classmates always laughed and he was always disciplined.

“You look very,” Xin said as he flipped through his mental English dictionary. “Beauty, today.”

Aryana smiled and blushed a bit. “Thank you,” She said, running her finger, almost quickly, from the base of his neck to his bellybutton. “Handsome, quite, you are yourself today, Xin Xin.”

He smiled and blushed much more than she had; thinking for a second that he should point out her mistaken inversion, but this didn't seem the best time, and something in her calling him Xin Xin made him almost not notice it anyway.

They had decided that she would speak Chinese to him and he would speak English to her in the hopes that they would both learn the languages. They sat, looking sometimes at each other sometimes at the ocean. The sand was hot under his feet and he was glad for the towels they were sitting on. It seemed like hours of uncomfortable silence even though it had been only moments since they had blushed.

His mother did not like Aryana, none of the older women in town did. They didn't like her tight clothes. They thought she should dress more like local woman, but Xin liked how she dressed. It made him want to kiss her and hold her and not care who saw.

When he felt her hand move on top of his, his breath stalled a second. He scrambled to think of every romance movie he'd ever seen or book he'd ever read, focusing on the American ones. He must have taken longer than he thought because she was smiling big and bright when he turned to her. He smiled back and brushed her dark brown hair behind her ear, but let his hand linger a bit on her cheek, his fingers barely touching the back of her neck. He pulled only slightly and she brought herself the rest of the way to his lips.

Xin Lee had imagined this moment for weeks, their first kiss. He did not want to stop. They kissed for a moment before they heard the little girl scream, and even then, she had to scream twice before they finally ceased. They smiled into each other's eyes before turning to see what was the matter.

The little girl sat on the ground, rocking and holding her foot to her chest. Xin put his sandals on and ran to see if the girl was hurt. She had probably just stepped on a jellyfish. As he got closer, he could see blood running down her arm. He quickened his pace. Once he was within a couple meters, something cracked under his foot. There was glass everywhere. The girl sat in a pile of shattered glass. He kept walking, but with every step more glass cracked. Up and down the wet sand at the water's edge, it all looked to be covered in the thinnest layer of unbroken glass, like a glaze.

"Let me see your foot," Xin said when he got to the girl.

He turned her so she was not cut by the glass she sat in. He saw that there was a big gash in the bottom of her foot where a heavy shard was sunk deep. He looked at the girl, confused, but she was not looking at him. She had spun as far as she could to cry out toward the ocean.

It was then that he finally heard Aryana shouting, "Xin, bring her back. Xin, the water. Look. Bring her back."

He followed the girl's stare out into the water. Nobody was swimming. Nobody was splashing. Everyone just floated, face-up or face-down.

Aryana was shouting again. "Xin, bring her back. Come here."

He scooped the girl into his arms and ran back to Aryana, careful to run through places where he'd already broken the glass.

He set the girl down on his towel. "What happened?" He had tried not to shout at her, but he was sure he did anyway.

The girl answered swiftly in Chinese, "I was on that cliff, using the viewers to look for dolphins." Xin looked up to the outlook where the girl was pointing; it was a long hike down. "I looked down and saw a lot of shadows coming toward the beach, some were white, some were shadows under the water. I ran down to warn the lifeguard about the Man 'O War."

Xin looked up at Aryana whose eyes were frantic with confusion. "Man 'O War," was all he had to say.

She reached in her bag for her phone. She turned to him, clearly annoyed and frightened. "No service."

Xin scrambled to grab his from his pants pocket at the far end of the towel. He had no service either; Aryana threw her phone into her purse and started lacing up her shoes.

Xin felt a static shock as he touched the girl's shoulders to turn her toward him, and he heard glass crack under Aryana's feet as she went to run for help. She froze and looked around as they watched the sheen of glass slowly creep up the beach.

She was about to continue for help when the little girl screamed again. She screamed until she had no breath left, inhaled, and screamed some more. She pointed toward the water. Aryana screamed too when she saw them. Xin just sat silent, stunned. Walking shadows appeared from out of the water. They looked ferociously human, but smaller – like burnt children though on some parts you could see a shimmering white.

They had brought the floating people out of the water. Up and down the beach were piles of the unconscious surrounded by congregations of these things. Xin wanted to tell the girls to be quiet, but he envied their screaming. He was frozen, sweating in the beach heat.

When the things started to come up the beach toward them, Aryana ran toward the steps to the parking lot.

“Xin, come on!”

He could not move.

The little girl smacked his chest. “Carry me, I can’t walk!”

Xin sat in awe. He could not move, he didn’t know if he wanted to.

“Xin! Come on! Move your ass!”

Her voice was further away now. The little girl had stopped shouting and hitting; now she was curled in his arms against his chest, burying her face so deep it was as if she was trying to hide inside him.

When they finally stood over him, he could do nothing but stare into their faces. They had no eyes, but he could feel them looking back. He turned to see if Aryana had gotten away. She was frozen on the parking lot steps, one hand on the steel guard rail, shaking very slightly. She must have been crying. Xin knew she wouldn’t want to leave him. He looked back at the figures in front of him. They seemed to be trying hard not to be scary which frightened him a little.

“Hello,” He said, once in English and once in Chinese.

They seemed to hear him, and Xin thought he saw one nod in reply. His phone rang and they seemed to be waiting for him to pick it up. He disentangled one arm from the little girl and grabbed his phone. The words **No Service** were still in bold on the screen, but when he flipped it open he read a text that had apparently been sent by nobody.

It said hello in both English and Chinese. When he closed his phone, it still said **No Service** on the front. He looked back at Aryana, now slumped on the steps. A couple of them were carrying her back to the piles of the other unconscious on a bright metal cart with tank-like treads that somehow managed not to break the glass. When he looked back at them, the one in front was smiling with a mouth full of too many tiny, pointed teeth to count. The smile seemed like it was meant to be comforting, but Xin’s sweat nearly froze on the back of his neck.

When it began to reach down for him, Xin leaned back a little and it withdrew, but then it reached again. It seemed to be gentle. It was reaching for his eyes. For a moment Xin thought it might take them, since it had none of its own, but he found himself leaning forward, holding the little girl tighter with every millimeter he leaned closer. When it made contact, it spread its webbed hand over Xin’s face, placing its thumb on one temple and its index finger on another. The webbing blocked out the light and all Xin saw was black. He felt a tingle and his vision pulsed in all colors. Then, he knew he was asleep and that he would not wake.

Lieutenant Maoki

The shore was beautiful – like a graveyard in the early morning – with the sun shining off the marble stones, but just like the shiny gravestones, the glassed surface of the beach sand reminded Lieutenant Maoki that this scene marked the dead. Lieutenant Maoki felt this way whenever he saw the sand with glass on top, broken here or there with specks of crimson to mark the feet that had broken the perfect surface.

Today they were in a small village just south of Fuzhou. The village itself was nothing special. Wide open fields filled the landscape, dotted here or there with clusters of houses, at least two at a time to hang lines for drying clothes between them. Lieutenant Maoki had grown

up in a village much like this when he was very young, but he was sent to the city to live with his mother's parents after his father died when Lieutenant Maoki was only six. His grandparents had been wealthy people, and had never really liked his father. Somehow, they had blamed him for his mother dying shortly after giving birth to him. He didn't remember his father that well, but he must have been quite a man to win a woman like his mother, a rich woman, when he had nothing to offer but himself. He knew it had to be true because he was never as happy as he was standing in a little village, and he must have felt something of his father there that he couldn't quite remember consciously.

"Just glassed sand and missing people again, sir," Chen said, beckoning Lieutenant Maoki from his reflections.

A couple weeks ago the young investigator would have followed up with other details, but now it went without saying that it was always the same. Lieutenant Maoki had been named the lead investigator once these strange disappearances had become widespread. The local departments weren't much help. Nobody ever seemed to have seen anything, but there was usually someone with glass in their foot that had come to a beach, lake shore, or riverbank, looking for someone they never found. Still, he refused to stop asking his questions; it was his job.

"Any witnesses this time? Has the forensic team finished? Any new traces?" he said, not allowing room for answers in between because he either knew them or knew that there were no answers to be had.

Chen just shook his head and gave only a slight glance at Lieutenant Maoki before assuming he could leave. There seemed to be no pattern. The vanished were of all ages, sexes, and nationalities. One of the first taken had even been an American exchange student, and there had been a couple visiting from Japan as well. The couple's family had already come and begun their own private search, but the American Embassy had notified the girl's parents and had had no reply as of yet. That was probably lucky, the last thing they needed was the American Government breathing down their necks for results.

Someone called, "Sir," from behind; Lieutenant Maoki turned to face the head of the local police department, Roy Lee. His mother had been American and he looked odd with his blonde hair, blue eyes, and extremely Chinese face. "The girl that first came to the scene is very scared. She doesn't want to tell me anything." Lieutenant Maoki slumped. *Not again.* The people in the villages had only recently caught the rumor that was sweeping through all the cities; the rumor was that the government was making everyone disappear. For all he knew, it was true; he could just be a distraction meant to mask the government's involvement, but he couldn't think that way.

"I'll go talk to her. You handle the crowd and your officers. Best if she doesn't see me with you."

Roy Lee nodded and did as he was told. As he walked to his car, Lieutenant Maoki took off his badge and tie. He took off his watch and button-up shirt and changed into the rough cloth of the villages. He also threw on some cloth pants, clipped his badge to them, hiding it under his shirt, and wrapped some bandages that he had stained with fake blood around his feet. He glanced at his reflection quickly in the window and headed for the girl.

He decided to approach her from behind so that she would think he had snuck into the perimeter. When he strode up to the girl, he made sure to make some noise as he came, best not to startle her. She looked about sixteen. She had long hair, almost to her waist, and she wore a simple dress that was frayed and stained at the bottom, probably from field work. She looked

surprisingly calm, but was probably in shock. When she turned and spied him, she studied him up and down. She looked so long that he was sure she had found something off about his disguise.

“Do not talk to the police little one,” Maoki said. “They will take you if you saw anything.”

The girl nodded. Maoki examined the girl’s feet while he waited to see if she would trust him. She winced once as he started to undo the wrappings, but showed no pain afterward.

“What is your name?” she said, seeming distracted by something far off.

“Chin,” Maoki said. “What’s yours?”

She was silent for a moment, still staring toward the beach.

“Mei Lee.” Her face was still expressionless.

“Did you get any glass?” Maoki said. “I hear it’s magical.”

She was silent until Maoki finished wrapping her foot and looked up at her face again. Mei Lee was not looking at the beach, but the water. She was looking far out into the water as if she were trying to find a boat on the horizon.

“Maybe,” she said suddenly. “I don’t want any though.”

Lieutenant Maoki could not take his eyes off her. She seemed to be frozen, like a port statue constantly regarding the sea. He found nothing else to occupy himself during the silence; he just stared into her face as she puzzled at the horizon. He wanted to talk, to break the silence, but he couldn’t make any words come.

He nearly jumped when she finally said, “The police did not do this.” He could not get his question out before she continued. “Nobody made a sound. I was just over that hill.” She pointed to a small arch in the landscape, no more than twenty meters different than the flat – beach. “Nobody screamed, nobody said, ‘help,’ and there were definitely no guns – nobody yelling orders.”

“What – ”

“The Walkers say it’s the planet’s vengeance, swallowing us up whole for the violence we do it.”

Maoki frowned at the mention of The Walkers; *damned doomsday priests*. They had been more prevalent since the third abductions, and it seemed every incident doubled their numbers. There had not been any riots yet, and the government was exploring every avenue to find their leader. All of the Walkers wore his assumed name on their robes, Sonic.

Suddenly, the girl began to shudder.

“I shouldn’t have left her,” she said. “I just wanted to get her a purple one.”

Maoki looked down at Mei Lee’s shaking hands. Her knuckles were white, she squeezed so hard, but he could see the purple petals poking out from between her fingers.

She began crying heavily.

“She wanted one to put in her hair,” she said. “She looked so pretty with flowers in her hair.”

Maoki didn’t know what to say. He wanted to hug her but she still sat perfectly upright, and did not lean in when he opened his arms. She ignored him. He put his hand on her shoulder and stood to go, but as he did, he heard a clear “clink” sound. He looked down to see that the girl’s necklace had stuck to his badge, even through his shirt.

“What is that made of?” Maoki said. “Does it always do that?”

She shook her head as she unclasped the necklace. She didn't seem to care that he had a badge, or at least was not surprised. She just took her eyes slowly back to the water. She let the ends fall, but the small charm still clung to his badge.

"May I take this? I promise I'll get it back to you; I would just like to run –"

"Take it," she said without hesitation.

Lieutenant Maoki nodded and signaled for Chen to come get the necklace.

"Give this to the forensic team," he said, handing the necklace to Chen. "You tell them that they better be able to explain this to me by tomorrow."

Ellen

It had been six weeks since the American embassy had informed Ellen and Ron Bucks that their daughter, Aryana, had disappeared from a beach in Shandong with about forty other people. They had sent questions back, so many questions. Ellen was especially persistent. Still, they had not had a single reply, and even though the people at the embassy said that some delay was normal, she had begun to see that even they were confused at how long this was taking.

Ron entered the study carrying a stack of papers he probably needed to work on, but didn't even bother sitting them down when he saw Ellen at the desk.

"Another letter, Ellen?" Ron said. Ellen could hear that he was trying to sound as if he didn't want to write one himself. "I'm sure they're doing all they can. Maybe they haven't gotten any of your letters. Did you put on the right postage?"

Ellen clenched her jaw; she didn't want to yell at him even though she was angry to no end that he seemed content to sit in their little San Diego apartment while their daughter was lost across the Pacific in China and do nothing but hope Aryana would walk through the door. The fact that he only wanted to talk her out of the study so he could work on his damn papers in his special chair made her want to throw something at him for the first time in over thirty years of marriage.

"The embassy sent the letters for me, Ron, I'm sure they know the postage."

Ellen could see that Ron was trying to think of another way to explain the fact that China had lost their daughter and now wouldn't even say what they were doing to find her.

"Have you tried emails? I bet the embassy could get you someone to email."

Ellen was glad she was facing the computer screen so Ron couldn't see her roll her eyes. She didn't want to fight. "I tried that already, remember?" It had been weeks ago and either Ron had forgotten or hoped she had so she would have something to try for a couple hours. "I sent four different emails and each one got returned with an error message."

"Did you ask the people at the embassy why? I'm sure –"

"Ron, just let me write my letters." Ellen said, more harshly than she'd intended.

Ellen loved him, but he didn't know when to let her be, and she couldn't stand being talked to like one of his students in his guidance office – he was agitatingly calm and talked like everything he said was some zen-master insight that was sure to be the right answer. "Go watch the news or something; maybe you'll hear some news about Aryana."

Ron sighed as he always did when he didn't know what to do. "Okay, honey, just don't get too angry. You catch more flies with honey than vinegar." He was so smug. She almost turned and threw the ashtray that nobody used, but the saying did make Ellen think of the last time she'd talked to her daughter.

Aryana had called to talk about her host family. She was having a hard time adjusting to the customs there, especially how women were supposed to act; Shandong was smaller, much more traditional. Aryana said that her host mother often made snide comments about her tight clothes or the fact that she wore makeup, and she had nearly had a fit the first time she saw Aryana going to the beach in her two-piece bathing suit.

Ellen remembered saying, “Just be nice sweetheart, smile and nod, and don’t lose your temper or she wins. You’ll catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”

Ellen stared up at the letter on the screen. All she had so far was, **Dear Mr. Ho.** She had already sent him five letters in six weeks and twice as many emails, but absolutely nothing back. Ellen would have settled for anything at this point, even some manufactured load of politics that said they were doing all they could and that the police wouldn’t rest until Aryana was found.

Maybe I’m not loud enough. She knew that she was being ignored. How could they not have gotten her letters at this point? And she was almost certain they had blocked her emails. She needed to get the story out there. She needed to cause a ruckus. She would write the local TV station. Ron would hate being on TV, but he could pout on the couch for all she cared, and if he got too irritating he could sleep there too. She would write Congressman Laurence and both of the senators. She knew one was Lewis; she would have to look up the other one.

She decided to stop writing and pray a little. She was glad Ron hadn’t walked in while she was praying. If that had happened she might have wound up actually throwing the ashtray. She had thought he would have come with her to the church when they’d found out Aryana had gone missing, but that seemed to have had the opposite effect. He had almost glared at her for going, as if this whole thing was the universe showing her that God didn’t exist, that Ron had been right all these years. She refused to believe it, God had a plan, she knew it.

She had been used to reading her Bible and going to church alone for the last fifteen years since Ron’s brother had died, but she just felt so helpless now. She knew Ron had to feel helpless too, but she hated how he seemed so content in it. It was as if he expected the feeling to just go away, to fade with time, and maybe it would, but he would always regret not doing more, and that was what Ellen feared. Ron seemed strong now, but she was scared the regret of inaction and contentment would eat at him. She didn’t know if she could handle watching him whither for the rest of their lives together.

She prayed for Aryana as she had so often over the last six weeks, but this time, she prayed for Ron too. She prayed that he would let himself feel it; the loss, the helplessness. She prayed that he would wake up and protest and slam his fists on the desk at the embassy. Mostly, she prayed that he would find a way to get back to being the man she married. The fiery man who had proposed to her in front of her parents after her father had refused Ron his blessing.

She needed someone to miss their daughter with her, to move heaven and earth with her, and she needed that someone to be Ron.

Ming Han

“It is not the government!” shouted the crazed monk from atop his fence post in the village square, “It is not thieves or kidnappers! They are burned children, souls, spirits, vengeance from the land and the sea our government pollutes and wastes!” Nobody paid the man much mind; the only thing really accomplished was that nobody littered in the village square

anymore – it wasn't worth the tongue lashing. He also had the children scared to swim the rivers; some were even afraid to wade the shallow pools to plant rice.

The disappearances were the talk of every village. Ming Han had even seen the shards of glass that supposedly covered the beaches wherever people went missing. They were sold at outrageous prices because the vendors said they were magical; the pieces with blood on them were the most valuable. He didn't believe any of it: the disappearances, the glass, the magic – it was all just some fabrication to sow fear and confusion, probably to mask something even worse the government was doing. He just hoped that the vanished people would be found in the end – most likely by some miracle of the government.

Ming Han lived in a village called Little River and had been its envoy to the city now for some time. It was more a matter of convenience than qualification; he worked in the city so it was no trouble for him to handle the village's small dealings. Recently though, his charges had become more important; many of the villagers were getting sick, pollution was the suspected culprit. The villagers had drafted and signed petitions, made phone calls. Some had even tried bribery, but there were not enough signatures or money in the village to gain them any voice.

The land was dying. The rice had come up small and stunted or not at all, and the herds of livestock were only getting smaller and left only sick, inedible meat. But the government didn't care and neither did the cities; they must have thought their food was grown in the back of the stores and restaurants where they bought it. *Idiots.* Ming Han felt as though it was his fault that the government did not listen. *I'm not a great speaker, and I don't know anybody important. The village could find a better man than me.* But he could not say it. He could not be seen shirking another responsibility.

The government was sending the military to see to the evacuation of the village. Some had heard just a small unit; others had heard there would be thousands, a show of force. There was talk that some of the men in the village were meeting with men from other villages that night; that they were going to find a way to keep their land and get it clean again.

"Stupid," Ming Han's father had said. "You know how badly it will go for their families if they are caught."

Ming Han had just nodded. He could not bring himself to argue with his father. *I'm still going, though.*

"We must humble ourselves before the land," shouted the monk. "It will starve us of food and water, or swallow us as it has these others."

Ming Han wanted to tell the man to move along, but he did not have the patience to weather the argument that would ensue, and the embarrassment would be too much if he failed. *Maybe at the meeting tonight we'll figure out how to get rid of these Walkers.*

When Ming Han left that night, his father was still awake. Ming Han did not pass his father on the way out, but he could hear the television in the other room, and he was glad that his father did not get up to try and convince him to stay. He didn't know if he could defy him so openly.

The meeting was in the basement of the barkeep's house, a man named Lee Sin. He was a nice enough man during business hours, but Ming Han hated speaking to him when he wasn't behind the bar. He had a quick temper, and he didn't like to discuss anything. If Lee Sin wanted it a certain way, that was how it had to be or he'd have no part of it. So it was probably a good thing that the meeting was at Lee Sin's house – he could have everything his own way.

Ming Han was one of the first to arrive. As he opened the door, he saw that the only ones there before him were Lee Ho, the only man in town bigger than Lee Sin, *thank God*, and a man

Ming Han had only met a couple of times – he thought his name was Zhou something-or-other, but he was ashamed to ask so he would wait for him to introduce himself. Lee Sin was not present at the moment.

Once all the way in the room, he noticed a man in the corner. He had his back turned and was wearing a robe. When he turned around, Ming Han could not believe what he saw. The shouting monk from the square was standing with a bowl of rice in his hands and a look on his face that made Ming Han feel as if the monk didn't find himself the least bit out of place.

Ming Han looked from the monk to the other men in the room. When they met his eyes, they just shrugged. Ming Han didn't like the noisy monk being there, but he wasn't so noisy just now, and if Ming Han hadn't seen him earlier in the square he would think him a most agreeable sort of holy man. Resolved to not be bothered by this stranger, Ming Han sat his things down quietly beside one of the empty chairs and helped himself to a bowl of rice.

While he was filling his bowl he felt someone standing close behind him. He turned to see that the monk was standing well within Ming Han's personal bubble.

"Hello," said the monk, leaning even closer to Ming Han's face.

"Hi," Ming Han said. He tried to step around the monk, but was cut off.

"I think I saw you in the square today," he said. "You ignored me, much like all the rest."

The night was not shaping up well. He had been there only a minute or so and, already, this monk was on his nerves.

"Yes, I believe I heard you in the square today," Ming Han said as he tried to get past one more time.

The monk cut him off again. "Well I'm glad someone heard."

"It's pretty hard not to," Ming Han said. "It's a wonder anyone else is heard in the square besides you."

Ming Han didn't want to get in an argument with the monk when he had entered, but it was becoming an exponentially more tempting idea.

"I suppose I am loud," he said. "But it's only because my message is so important."

"Ah, yes," Ming Han said. "The monsters the Earth has sent to take vengeance on us for polluting her." The monk's smile wavered slightly, but it was enough to see how forced it was. "Are they Tanuki or Kitsune?"

The monk's face became stern. "They are shadows," he said. "Deep shadows, so dense they are solid. They talk only to Sonic, and he speaks only to us." The monk narrowed his eyes. "And he has sent me here, and I will not be chased away by the squawking son of some big man in town."

Ming Han was slow to respond. The monk's smile returned, seeing that he had caught Ming Han by the tongue. Ming Han wanted to fight, but his father would be even more angry if he was thrown out. *What an embarrassment I'd be then.*

He gave a solid nod to the monk before he said, "Enjoy the rice, I hear you Walkers eat little."

When he went around the monk this time, he was not cut off. He took a seat beside Lee Ho, back to back with the man whose name he could not completely recall.

"Why is the Walker here?" Ming Han said.

Lee Ho shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "He was here when I got here, talking to Zhou Yi."

Ming Han spoke to the other man over his shoulder, "Did you bring the Walker?"

Zhou Yi nodded. "He met me on the road not far from my house. He said he had a message for the meeting."

"Why did you bring him?"

Zhou Yi turned to face Ming Han. "Better to have someone who knows of the meeting here rather than out there, wouldn't you say?"

Ming Han had to agree.

"I wonder who told him," Ming Han said.

"Sonic." The monk was now standing directly in front of Ming Han. Zhou Yi had been facing that direction and seemed equally surprised that the monk was now so close.

Lee Ho stood up to tower over the monk and said, "Why didn't the, forest-wizard come tell us himself?"

The monk laughed, which didn't seem to make Lee Ho all too happy. "He isn't a wizard, and he lives in the forest because that's where they talk to him."

Lee Ho laughed. "*They?*"

"The shadows; the children of the Earth," he said. "Sonic sits on a beach of glass by a river, and they talk to him."

Lee Ho leaned in to laugh closer to the monk. "Oh, yes," he said. "My grandmother hears them too, but they come to her in the nursing home."

The monk reached into his robe and pulled out a shard of glass on a string; it had blood on one corner. "To claim our robes we must walk to Sonic with bare feet," he said. "Each of us wears one of our bloody shards around our neck as a symbol of our faith." He paused a moment, as if he were remembering something beautiful. "Sonic wears the rest to show that his faith mirrors the purity of nature."

Lee Ho looked over his shoulder at the other two men. "Next he'll be saying it's magic."

The monk laughed his quiet laugh. "No, that would be silly," he said. He turned and went to the table for more rice.

As Lee Ho sat back down, Lee Sin entered the room with four other men. Ming Han recognized all but one. The stranger wore a dark robe and a darker expression. Ming Han was sure this stranger had never smiled in his life; his face lacked the wrinkles for it.

Ming Han was so focused on the strange man that he almost jumped when the monk, who had been so talkative a moment before, bowed to him and wished him a good night. Ming Han returned the bow and the monk flashed an anxious smile before leaving. He seemed to nod to the dark stranger, but the man didn't acknowledge it at all. Ming Han didn't think he'd be anything but happy to see the monk go, but it made him even more unsettled about the gloomy man.

Lee Sin stepped forward, bowed, and began to introduce the men, but the dark man interrupted him.

"I assume these men all know each other, and I have no name so let me speak my part and I'll be gone."

All of the men looked at Lee Sin, but he only looked at the floor and nodded.

The man pulled out a shard of glass on a string much as the monk had had, but this one was odd. It had two spots of blood, but one looked to run straight through the center of the piece. Ming Han could see that the blood was within the shard as well as on the outsides.

"I come to you at the direct request of Sonic. That one that just left was on an indirect errand; you would call it a feeling."

None of the men spoke, this dark stranger seemed to have arrested their attention with the strange shard, and his voice brooked no arguments.

“Sonic says that if you want to clean your lands you must fight for them.”

“We have no weapons,” Lee Ho whispered.

“You will not need weapons,” the stranger said without looking at Lee Ho. “The children will be your weapons and your armor. They have told Sonic that the government is sending a large detachment, a show of force, to remove you, and the children think this is the perfect time to strike.”

The room fell silent for what seemed like minutes. The men didn’t look at each other. Eventually Ming Han spoke.

“We do not believe in your children,” he said.

“Speak for yourself,” Lee Sin said, glaring at him. “My niece was taken two weeks ago. They still have not found her, but today I heard her speak in this man’s radio.”

Every man looked at Lee Sin. Some looked shocked, others shook their heads in disbelief, but Ming Han could see each man beginning to doubt his views on these children, these shadows. Ming Han shifted his gaze to the stranger.

“What kind of trick is this?” Ming Han said.

“No trick,” the man said, grave as ever. “All those taken rest with the children.”

“So why should we help them?” Ming Han said. He looked to Lee Sin. “Will they give her back?”

“No,” the stranger said. “The children just think it would be a nice memory for you to have.” The man turned to leave, but just as he reached the door, he looked back over his shoulder. “If you fight, the children will help you beat the soldiers. Nobody will come to harm and your land will be saved.” He stared across the landscape for just a second, as if trying to best word his closing thoughts. “Let them march you into the valley just down the road. Once there, resist them openly, and the children will handle the rest.”

Chun Kai

The bar was dim, lit only by candles and Christmas lights strung along the ceiling. Captain Chun Kai sat at the end of a long table, leaned far forward into the conversation. His elbows were almost in his friends’ cups.

“Then this navy prick tells me that he can’t even talk about it –” Chun said, “asks for my clearance card.” The rest of the table started to boo the absent navy man. “So I say, ‘Whatever, I’m just the delivery man,’ and he says, ‘Yeah, Chinese Special Postal Service, right.’”

The rest of the table ohhed and ahhed like kids circling to watch a fight.

“He had that dumbass navy smile,” Chun said. “So I broke his fuckin’ nose with the clipboard and said, ‘I think you meant Special Forces, bitch.’”

The table cheered. Everyone raised their glasses before doing their shots. Chun sat back in his chair, smiling. A couple of the guys patted him on the shoulder as they got up to buy the next round.

Laughing at the repeated navy jokes, Chun still couldn’t get over that the little prick hadn’t told him what was in the box. *I shouldn’t have broken his nose though.* Chun didn’t know what his punishment would be. *Maybe he won’t report it,* but Chun knew he would – the guy was navy. The thought of the navy made Chun get up and pace to the window to look out at the

ocean. The fancy dining hall Chun's father had wanted to rent to host the celebration of Chun's upcoming promotion didn't have a view nearly as beautiful as this old bar.

Chun had had his choice of military branches. He'd chosen Special Forces because his father was a general. He called his father *The Eraser* because no matter how many dishonorable things Chun did, his father always made them go away; so, try as he might, Chun could never bring shame to his family.

He had brought much honor though. He was climbing ranks faster than anyone could believe. He was an expert marksman and hand-to-hand combatant (jujutsu); not to mention that he'd graduated officer training early. Most people thought it was his father's doing, but Chun didn't care what they thought. The Special Forces was the one thing in his life Chun had done completely on his own.

He would get to command his own unit soon as long as the nose-breaking incident didn't hold him up. It shouldn't. The Eraser would take care of it. He wondered which of the men around the table would request to transfer to his unit. He looked at the giant man with a bald head sitting a couple seats down to his left; *Ko will come, he has to know I'll get the big missions*. Chun had known Ko since they were children. They'd met when Chun's mother had taken him and his sister to stay with her parents in their village for a summer. Ko was almost a year older, but he'd waited for Chun to turn eighteen so that they could enlist together.

Cho and Lin walked back to the table carrying a big bottle of champagne in an ice bucket. Chun almost laughed. *Any excuse for the old man to use that sword of his*. Cho was one of the few men in China still allowed to carry a sword in public. One of his ancestors had saved the emperor's life, and the emperor had thanked him by decreeing that every man in his line may wear a sword of folded steel in the samurai fashion until the end of time. So far, nobody in Cho's family had done something stupid enough to make it worth the government's time to revoke the right, but he was sure Cho would find a way.

Cho drew his sword, squared it on the bottle, and sent the cork ricocheting around the room to a chorus of cheers.

"Our samurai bottle-opener," yelled Linlee. The men all shook with laughter and Linlee gave Cho a hefty pat on the back as he filled his glass. Chun's was the last glass to be filled.

Just as the bottle was placed back in the ice bucket, Ko stood, raised his glass, and said, "To Chun, soon to be the youngest commander in history."

A couple of the men shouted, Cho whistled, and the others nodded. "I'm honored to have served with you these past years, and would be honored to continue."

Chun smiled and gave his old friend a grateful nod as the men drank.

While some of the men were getting refills, a woman burst into the bar, panting.

"Help, someone help," she shouted. "The beach."

When the woman said, "beach," everything stopped. Chun was on edge, waiting for the word, the horror story from the hills.

"Glass." Was the only thing she said after that. "Glass – glass – glass."

Chun looked at the woman's feet; her left one was bleeding from the bottom. This was an opportunity.

"Ko, Linlee," Chun said in his commander's voice, "you two grab the guns out of the van." They nodded and hurried to obey. "Cho, grab my rifle from my trunk, I want the night vision scope." He was already out the door before Chun finished the command. "The rest of you, form up outside the bar, pistols out, flashlights on. This is what we've been waiting for." Chun

stood tall and straight before he finished. “We’re going to become national heroes tonight, gentlemen.”

The Christmas lights in the bar went out as the men were leaving; *they must have cut the power*. Only candles remained. The lack of electric light made Chun feel like an ancient warrior taking the battlefield. *There’s glory out here.*

As soon as the men were formed up, Ko and Linlee arrived with the M-16s, and Cho with Chun’s rifle shortly after.

“I tried to get the night vision scope, sir, but it wouldn’t turn on.”

Chun figured that Cho just couldn’t figure it out, but he couldn’t yell at him now.

“That’s okay. It’s a full moon tonight I’ll be all right.”

Cho nodded, grabbed an M-16 from the stack and took up his position.

“Flashlights and laser sights on,” Chun said. “Sweep left to right, we start at the tree line and make our way down the beach.”

The men loaded their weapons with a unanimous click, but they didn’t start moving.

“Sir,” Ko shouted from the right, “the flashlights and laser sights aren’t working.”

Chun froze for a second. This was strange. He looked down at his watch. 12:00 flashed on the screen, but it had to be at least one o’clock.

“Forget the lights and sights,” Chun said, trying to sound confident. “It’s a full moon and we can shoot at their lights if they have any. Sweep the beach.”

The men moved like machines while Chun watched through his scope and kept an eye on their blind spots

“It’s all glass, sir,” Ko yelled, once they had hit the beach. “Blood in a couple places.”

Ko should not have been shouting. The enemy would know that the men had a spotter, but if Chun yelled back it would betray his position.

“Ahhhhhhhh,” a woman screamed from within the bar.

Chun was on his feet with the M-16 over his shoulder before she even finished screaming. He burst through the door just in time to see someone leave through the window. The woman ran up and hugged him.

“Thank you,” she said, “thank you, thank you.”

“Where did he go?” Chun said, pushing the woman away so he could look into her face, “Did you know him? What was his face like?”

The woman just looked up at Chun with an expression that was neither stunned nor frightened, relieved or afraid.

She said, “It didn’t have a face.”

She is in shock.

“Come with me,” he said.

As he headed back toward the beach, basically dragging the woman by the hand, he clicked his radio to talk to Ko, but he got no signal. *It’s dead. This has to be high-level – cutting the bar was easy, but the flashlights, the laser sights, the radios, that was something new.*

“Ko,” Chun yelled as soon as he got back to the beach, “report.”

“Nobody, sir,” Ko said, his head hanging. “Just some broken glass and some blood, just like the stories.”

“One of them tried to grab her from the bar,” Chun said.

“Did she get a good look at him?”

Chun didn’t want to tell them her exact words. “She’s in shock.”

“At least we have a witness; they’ve never left a witness before. This could blow the case wide open.”

The woman’s hand was shaking in his. When he looked back at her, she was crying. He looked around at the beach; in the moonlight, its glassed surface was beautiful in an impossible, unsettling way.

Chun almost ran when the woman behind him started screaming again. When he turned to see what she was screaming about, there was a child walking toward them, but he walked strangely. He walked like someone who had never known fear. The glass did not break beneath his feet.

“Are you all right?” Ko said, walking toward the boy, “were you on the –”

As soon as Ko put his hand on the boy, Ko collapsed. Instantly, all of the men had their guns trained on the little boy. Chun swept the woman behind him.

“On the ground!” Chun said, the pistol shaking in his hands. “Right now.”

The boy did not move for a moment but just stared at them. Then he started walking toward them.

“Stop.” Chun fired a warning shot in the air. “Another step and I shoot you.”

It did not even hesitate. Chun set his sights on the leg and fired. The bullet broke glass about two feet to the left of the target. He lined up a second and third shot, but both missed in different directions.

“Open fire,” Chun shouted. All but Linlee hesitated to open fire on the child, but once he took a couple shots, the rest followed. It didn’t matter; none of the bullets hit the boy. They seemed to bend around him.

It has no face. No eyes, no nose, just all black. He looked back at the woman – *do my eyes look so crazy and frightened?* Chun was frozen.

He heard Linlee yell, “Hold fire,” before charging toward it. He tackled it to the ground but didn’t get up. It just squirmed out from under him and came at the unit again.

Cho charged as if he was going to do what Linlee had done, but at the last second drew his samurai sword upward in a perfect nukitsuke and cut straight through it from under the left arm to over the right shoulder. For not having a face, it looked very startled.

Everyone stood still, half expecting it to get up, put itself back together, and come at them again. Chun looked back at the woman; she looked even more scared than she had before.

Cho was standing over the body, by the water’s edge, his sword raised high over his head. One second he was waving and pumping the blade in the air, the next he was being dragged back into the ocean. It all happened so fast: Cho was grabbed, the men started firing into the water, a huge vehicle that looked like a small tank with at least fifty tentacles rolled onto the shore and started grabbing the men. Once it grabbed them, they stopped moving.

He felt the woman pulling at his arm and that was all he needed. He whirled and headed for the bar. He didn’t even open the door as he ran by, he just yelled, “Run,” and hoped they heard him. The woman was faltering so he threw her onto his shoulder. *Thirteen kilometers to the compound.*

Congressman Laurence

Congressman Leonard Laurence arrived late to his district office, just outside of San Diego. He had been out with some campaign contributors the night before and was just thankful he didn't have a hangover.

College was one thing, but get a couple wealthy old guys in a steakhouse with some bottles of expensive bourbon and look out – I'd like to see any college kid try that out.

He had to do it though; he was in full-on campaign mode and he needed the checks. Truth-be-told, he hadn't had the best term. He'd pretty much been resigned to the shadows. He was on no big committees and didn't make the news much.

"You need something people can associate you with, Leo," his campaign advisor, Bill Schneider, had said. "They need to hear a story on the news and say, 'Yeah, I think that's what Congressman Laurence was talking about.'"

Congressman Laurence knew it was true, but he couldn't find anything, and a charity was his last resort – anyone could do a charity. No, he needed to show that he was using the power of his office to get things done.

"Congressman," said his assistant, Shelly, smiling at him as he shambled into the office. "You have a lot of mail, what should I do with it?"

For a second he thought he'd tell her to just give it to the interns, but then he remembered he didn't have much else to do.

"Arrange it by volume and sort out the junk before you bring it in."

Shelly smiled. "I'll get right on it, sir."

She had just been an intern, but she was a bright one, and when her internship had ended he had offered her a job as his personal assistant. She was a little naïve, but that made Leo want to try harder sometimes, to make her think that there were still some politicians that actually did some work for their constituents – *even if it wasn't true*. She wasn't hard on the eyes either, and that smile, he had thought more than once, that it was a scandal waiting to happen.

As soon as Congressman Laurence got into his office he poured himself some water and took some vitamins. He had to get the color back in his face – he knew he looked exhausted. He looked over his schedule:

12:30 – lunch at the local VFW

1:30 – meet and greet with new local Treasurer and some new Board of Education members.

3:00 – speak at a local school about education reform, shake some hands

A light, easy day. As he was wondering what kind of lunch awaited him at the VFW, Shelly walked in with a box full of mail. She could hardly carry it so she ended up slamming it on his desk.

"Sorry," she said as she strained to spin the box around. "The high volume stuff is in the front so just work your way back."

She gave him another smile before she turned to go. Congressman Laurence thought about the smiles for a minute – he wasn't married, would that be a scandal? He would have to ask Bill.

The first letter was from a woman named Ellen Bucks from Del Mar Heights. For a second he wondered why this was in the front of the volume pile, but then he saw the sticky note on the divider – 7. That was a lot of letters for one woman in just four weeks.

Dear Congressman Laurence,

My name is Ellen Bucks and I live in your district. I'm writing you because nobody else is helping, and while I don't know you can, I'm desperate. My daughter Aryana was with an exchange program to a small village near Linyi in the Shandong Province of China. She thought it would look good for college. It was her senior year and she was going to Oregon next fall. About three months ago, she disappeared along with about forty other people on a beach. I've tried writing the Chinese Embassy, but I haven't gotten any answers. I don't know what you can do, but I don't know where else to turn. I wrote Senator Daniels too, but I don't know if he'll read it; I guess I don't know if you will either, but I just need someone. I'll cry on TV, I'll show baby pictures, I'll say communists stole my baby, I just want people to know what's happened. I want people to demand that my baby be found like they did for all those other girls. Please, Mr. Laurence, help me bring my little girl home.

Sincerely,

Ellen Bucks

The letter had barely fallen to his desk before his finger was on the intercom.

"Shelly," he nearly shouted. "Get Bill on the phone and tell him to get over here now, and get me the contact information on an Ellen Bucks."

"Yes, sir," she said back through the intercom. He could picture her smiling, and he was glad that, for once, he was smiling too.

After a couple seconds, the line flashed on his phone and he picked it up.

"Leo," Bill Schneider said. "How is my favorite congressman today?"

"Incredible," Congressman Laurence said. "I think I just found the perfect way to make myself visible to voters."

"I'm all ears kid."

Congressman Laurence hated when Bill called him 'kid'. He was young for a congressman, but a congressman just the same, damn it.

"I just got a letter from a woman in my district," Congressman Laurence picked the letter up and started pacing behind his desk. "Apparently her daughter disappeared in China and nobody is really doing anything about it."

Bill cheered so loud, Congressman Laurence had to hold the phone away from his ear.

"That's great, Leo," Bill said. "I can see it now, Congressman Leonard Laurence saving a poor, American girl from the big bad Communist Chinese."

It sounded so much like a campaign add from the sixties, Congressman Laurence had to laugh a little along with his campaign advisor.

"So, what do you think? Should I –"

"Run with this, Leo," Bill said. "This isn't something you take your time with, and even if it was, time is something we don't have." Congressman Laurence knew he was right. "Do a press conference, first thing. Tell them that the message needs to get out there fast and loud, and have them bring pictures of the girl, people will really eat that up."

The way Bill talked about it, Congressman Laurence didn't know if he was aware this was meant to help more than just his campaign, but he was used to it. Bill had always been that way.

"Good idea Bill," Congressman Laurence said. "Keep your eyes on the news and tell me how I do."

"You know it kid." Bill laughed before he hung up the phone.

Lan Guang

Chairman Lan Guang arrived at his office at Party Headquarters on Tuesday morning ready to face what he was sure would be meetings straight through lunch and more emails than he could fathom. He hated vacationing with his wife, especially when it involved bringing her parents – she never let him work, and he had hardly had time to tend to his emergency line. Her father talked Lan's ear off, always thinking he could get favors and insider information he could brag to his friends about. His wife's mother wasn't so bad; she just nagged about more grandchildren, and about how little she got to see Zhou, the only one she had, anymore.

When he entered his office, a man in an army uniform sat in the dark with his back to the door. The figure turned and faced Chairman Lan as he entered and turned on the lights.

"Chairman Lan," was all he said.

Chairman Lan did not want to appear surprised so he tried to smile. The man looked so small sitting in the isolated meeting chair opposite Chairman Lan's huge desk, in the expanse of his huge office, which was always well dusted and swept, and the wood was always polished to a shine.

That small chair stood alone amongst the enormity and that was exactly how Chairman Lan liked it, but it was odd that this man already sat there. There were plenty of comfortable couches and reading tables around the sides of the room. Why would he have already picked the isolated chair facing the big desk? Chairman Lan did not like it. This man was bold or at least knew enough to appear that way.

"Yes," he said. "You must be my first appointment."

Chairman Lan gave a respectful bow, but did not go too deeply when he noticed the uniformed man did not rise. The man seemed gravely serious which put Chairman Lan on edge.

The uniformed man said, "I have no appointment."

The man's gaze followed Chairman Lan as he walked from the door and took his seat behind his desk. The distance from the man's chair to the desk was much more than normal, but Chairman Lan had done this on purpose. He liked the people in his office to feel far off, disconnected, as if they could never really reach him.

"You look like it's Monday," he said to the nameless visitor. "It's Tuesday, my friend. Cheer up, the week will be over soon."

The man's chubby face did not move, not even a hint of a smile; maybe it wasn't that funny. He regarded the man's uniform. It was freshly pressed and the commendations freshly polished, but Chairman Lan could see lint that the roller missed under his shoulder pads and around his buttons. *Filthy*, he thought to himself. Chairman Lan knew this man, but was slow in putting a name to the face. All at once the name leapt into his mind – General Chun Leong.

"You have not been answering your phone, Mr. Chairman," General Chun said flatly. "I would hate to think that the man charged with our national defense would make himself so unreachable."

Chairman Lan ground his back teeth, but forced a taut smile before he answered.

"Quite," Chairman Lan said as he glanced, again, at the commendations on the man's lapel. He took long enough to make sure General Chun noticed. "And what is it that has been so important as to bother my emergency number, General?"

"Chun," he said. "I am General Chun. How is it you do not know me?"

Chairman Lan gave the man an easy smile and said, "I can't be expected to know everyone in the military can I?" General Chun gave a nod, but it was clear that he was insulted. *Good.* "So what can I help you with today?"

"I will be helping you today, Chairman," General Chun said, still with an emotionless visage.

"Oh," Chairman Lan said in his most sarcastic elation. "I'm always looking for good help. They say it's so hard to find, but sometimes, it seems, it just shows up in your office." He focused his gaze on General Chun before finishing. "Unannounced."

Chairman Lan hadn't thought it possible, but General Chun's face became even more stern.

"I know of an imminent threat to our nation, sir," said the General, almost with a glare. "I am merely doing my duty." General Chun did not wait for the chairman to respond. "I have discovered the cause of these disappearances on the beaches. I have two witnesses. One is a hysterical woman from a small village – she has yet to give her name – but the other is my son. He is the only man to have fought these things and lived."

Chairman Lan sat back in his seat for a moment, musing. *These things.* He wanted to laugh, but didn't know if he could do it as convincingly as he'd have liked.

"So, is it demons or monsters?" He said as he watched General Chun's face for a minute before he cracked a smile, but he could not laugh. The General's expression was unmoved. *He is sure of himself.* "Seriously, General, why are you here?"

General Chun did not move. Chairman Lan could see that he was tightly gripping the armrest of the chair, but he couldn't tell if it was anger or anxiety. When he could tell that the general was completely serious, he stopped smiling.

"General," Lan said. "I am completely aware of who is responsible for the disappearances."

General Chun's face finally cracked and betrayed his surprise, but only slightly and only for a second.

"We are behind them, General," Lan said. "And if your son had encountered any of our men performing these operations, he would have been captured with the rest, debriefed, and released."

"No, sir –"

Chairman Lan cut him off. "The fact that your son told you of the incident at all makes him fit for dismissal."

General Chun looked close to shouting, but gathered himself before speaking.

"So," General Chun said. "We can account for all of the disappearances as operations under our supervision?"

Chairman Lan ground his back teeth. "Of course." Chairman Lan was searching General Chun's face for any sign or wavering, any indication that he doubted his story. "We are in complete control of the situation. Once we have adequately stirred up the public, we will 'solve' the problem and gain support for some changes we wish to implement."

General Chun was smiling now. “Almost like you read it straight from the memo.” He did not wait for the Chairman to respond. “Tell me, Mr. Chairman, how easy is it to turn whole beaches to glass?”

Chairman Lan ground his back teeth.

“It is exceedingly difficult,” he said, trying to force another relaxed smile. “We usually just come in afterward and lay glass on top, changing the sand on site is too expensive. What are you getting at?”

General Chun was getting cocky. He started talking with his hands. Chairman Lan wanted them off. In the good old days, it would have been done.

“So you would agree that it would be impossible for someone to stand on a beach and watch it turn to glass?”

“Yes,” Chairman Lan said, fittingly agitated now. “It would be impossible to do without melting.”

“I’m glad you agree because my son and his unit watched glass form around their very boots and not a man among them melted, though he is the only one to survive.”

Chairman Lan was unsure of what he should do. He could imprison General Chun and his son; he could buy their silence with promotion; or he could just continue to deny everything. It was just their word against his after all – they would be the ones that went to prison.

“Are you a betting man, Chairman?” General Chun said.

Chairman Lan was caught completely off guard. He couldn’t anticipate the General’s angle in this line of questioning so he stayed silent and let General Chun continue.

“I would wager my silence as well as my son’s if you could supply me with what, according to you, would be a simple piece of information for you to obtain.”

Chairman Lan felt as if he was being led into a trap, he proceeded with caution.

“I don’t think this is –”

The General cut him off. “Hypothetically then.”

Chairman Lan regarded General Chun for a moment. His face was unchanging, as it had been for most of the interview, but his knuckles were red from gripping the arm of the chair. Chairman Lan felt he still had the upper hand in the discussion. After all, one press of the security button under his desk and General Chun would disappear like anyone else – beach or no beach.

“Hypothetically,” Chairman Lan said. “What would my end of the wager be?”

General Chun gave a very restrained smile. “If you cannot supply the information, I would get to be in charge of any operation I want. One time only, I choose my own command.”

“Why do you think I need your silence?” Chairman Lan said. “And if I wanted it, why do you think I would have to ask you for it?”

The General stared Lan’s threat straight in the face and still didn’t flinch. His knuckles even lost some of their red. General Chun smiled a little as he rested his chin on his palm. He was relaxing. *Damnit.*

“We’re speaking hypothetically, Mr. Chairman,” General Chun said.

Chairman Lan was beginning to sweat around his hairline, as he always did when he got angry. He thought about the security button under his desk. He wanted to hit it; he badly wanted to hit it, but it was harder making generals disappear than most people.

“Hypothetically,” Chairman Lan said with mounting caution. “Yes, I’d take your bet. What would you want to know?”

General Chun leaned back as if he were in his own office chair, like this was his office, his department, his military, his damn country.

“Like I said, Mr. Chairman, if all that you’ve said is true, this information should be a couple clicks or an email away.”

General Chun was getting smug again, and Chairman Lan was getting dangerously close to pushing the security button.

“What do you want to know,” Chairman Lan said, too quickly.

General Chun put his hands up as if to show he meant no harm, as if he was an innocent child playing a game.

“Well, hypothetically,” General Chun said. “I would want to know the exact location that my son and his unit were attacked and, all but him, captured by this unit you say is behind these disappearances.”

Chairman Lan ground his back teeth. He had lost this little game of chess. He didn’t know if he should flip the board or change the rules. His finger hovered under the security button. He had always been a poor sport; maybe flipping the board was best.

Then an idea hit him and he smiled wider than he thought General Chun would want to see.

Chairman Lan stood and leaned forward. He wanted to loom over this cocky little man. “This information will be easy for me to get, but I’ll need to send some emails and make a call or two. How about you schedule an appointment with my secretary outside and I’ll have your answer then.”

General Chun did not flinch from his spot, but Chairman Lan could not tell what it meant. Did he feel defeated or victorious? Did the General know that this was a stall?

“I would prefer to make the appointment with you directly, sir,” General Chun said. “I don’t like trusting middlemen.”

They stared at each other on and off for a couple seconds before Chairman Lan consented.

“All right,” Chairman Lan said. “Let me pull up my schedule.”

General Chun gave a curt nod, but was otherwise an imperious statue.

“How does this Friday work for you, General? It’s my first available slot.”

General Chun nodded and rose to leave.

When he got to the door he turned back toward Chairman Lan and smiled, “I’m very interested to see how these emails turn out.” As he left, he laughed a little.

Once General Chun’s laughing could no longer be heard, Chairman Lan pressed his private intercom button to speak to his secretary’s earpiece.

“Ms. Kim,” Chairman Lan said. “Put me through to Admiral Hosuka’s private line.”

Sonic

The forest was a city, creatures going about their work – chirping, buzzing, and growling were their car horns. Sonic loved waking to these sounds and having no walls between him and his fellow beings. One of the Wardens would be up soon to bring him down the hill for breakfast. He left his canopy, naked, to grab his robes, a beautiful gift from the children – green silk against his skin covered by sheets of fused glass made from beach sand with dots of blood that passed

through where the sheets had once cut the feet of his followers. The robes reflected the fusion of nature and man, a transcendence that everyone in his order hoped to achieve.

He wore no shoes, few of the Walkers did. Sonic was grabbing his radio when the Tall Warden called to him.

“Master, we have prepared a humble meal,” he said, not coming past the point. “We are ready to receive you.”

All of the Wardens were tall. They were thick too. The children had chosen the strongest and most able to defend Sonic, though they were given no weapons. The children did not use weapons so the Walkers fought with only flesh and courage.

“Thank you,” Sonic said, “I’m sure it will be delicious, as always.”

Sonic glanced down at the point as he stepped past it. It was a circle of dirt that went all the way around the hill, but there was something eerie about it. The animals avoided it, the leaves blew around it, and Sonic couldn’t be sure, but he had the feeling that birds wouldn’t even fly over it. The children had marked it, sanctified it, as the beginning of the holy hill, the isolated area where Sonic was to spend all but his meal times unless otherwise advised by the children’s voice on his radio.

The meal was simple but delicious – eggs cooked over a fire, rice, wild berries, and some cool spring water. Sonic drank only spring water. The children said it was pure, that the particulates – the soil, the bacteria, and everything else – were supposed to be there. They naturally existed within the water so to take them out was to interfere with nature.

Sonic thanked the Wardens for his meal and made the trek back to his sanctuary alone, as always, to sit, meditate, and await the call of the children.

When he was first chosen by the children, he had not liked this life. He missed television, internet, and toilets, but he had come to love it. Much of his meditation focused on fate and chance, especially his own.

He had come into contact with one of the children when he was fishing – he used to be a village fisherman. He had been out late, using his net to catch bait for the next day, when he saw something floating toward his boat. Only it wasn’t floating, it was moving against the current. As it got closer, he saw the limbs. They were small, frail, and barely able to paddle. He had feared it was a boy or girl struggling to shore so he paddled over as quickly as he could.

When he pulled it into the boat, he had been horrified. Thinking it was a boy terribly burned in an accident, he then saw the wound. It was deep, cutting across the chest, but it was not bleeding. There was only a thick, blue gel that flowed slowly, like molasses.

It had no eyes, nose, or ears, and its teeth appeared vicious, but somehow it had seemed to plead with him, beg him to save its life. He did. He rowed as hard and fast as he could back to shore, and somehow still had the strength in his arms to carry it back to his small hut by the beach.

He got inside, locked the door, and didn’t come out for three days. Nobody came to check on him. He had no wife, no children, no family of any kind. For the first day, he had tried to feed it and it had refused. It did not speak, he did not know if it could.

On the second day, it seemed stronger, so he applied an ointment for burns to its skin and gave it a bath. His mother had been a nurse, and somehow he remembered that he was supposed to remove the burned skin gently with a sponge. He did, and what he found underneath was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen – glimmering white scales so smooth and seamless they were almost like skin. Even in the light of day, they glowed brilliantly. It was as if the glow came from

the scales themselves, not a simple shimmering in the sun or moonlight. He was sure that whatever this being was, it had been sent to him for a reason.

As it got stronger, Sonic tried harder and harder to communicate. He tried drawing, gesturing, and even writing, but it always just watched and smiled back.

After five days, it was strong enough to stand on its own. Sonic knew it would leave him soon, but he didn't want it to. That night, he begged and pleaded for it to speak to him, to tell him why it had sought him out. It smiled for a little while, but in the middle of the night, it woke him up and bid him follow. He did.

They walked for hours through the woods. A little before sunrise, it finally stopped at the banks of a river. Sonic nearly fainted when they all came walking out of the water. Some were black and some glowed like his companion, but all were incredible.

They all stood, watching him. Finally, his companion gestured for him to come forward. Sonic was enthralled by these sparkling beings and obeyed. His first step shattered the sand.

When he looked down, the beach was glass, all of it as smooth and reflective as the water. He looked at his companion, still gesturing for him to come forward, but also at his feet. Somehow, he knew what to do. He kicked off his simple shoes and continued. The glass cut into his feet with every step, but each hurt less than the last.

When he reached them, they all smiled and bowed. He bowed in return, surprised to see them honoring his country's custom. His companion retraced his path, but the glass did not break, or even crack, beneath its feet. It grabbed shards of glass from every broken spot and brought them back. It showed him the seven shards it held in its hand, each had some of his blood on it.

It closed its hands around them, and held the shards inside for at least a minute. The only sounds were those of the sleeping forest and quiet stream around them. When it opened its hands again, there was only a single ball of glass. The child dropped it into Sonic's hands. He held it up to the moonlight. It was a perfect circle, and at the center was his blood, stretching in all directions, as if shattered.

That night, his life changed. They took him to the hill, gave him an old radio and left. A little after sunrise, the radio started making noises, and when Sonic got closer, he heard them.

"Death, rebirth," rattled innumerable inhuman voices. "You are the resurrected, the invisible," they, or it, said all at once. "You are the sound to tell the world. You will lead, become the Sonic." From that moment on, they only referred to him as Sonic, and it soon became his name.

He did as he was told. For a week, maybe two, he was alone in the woods. Then, one morning, he awoke and found an unconscious man on the riverbank. Sonic woke him. The man was startled, clearly unaware of where he was. Sonic introduced himself by his old name, and the man did the same.

The two talked as they gathered berries and tried their best to catch some fish. Neither of them had much family around, and, like Sonic, the man had been a fisherman. The man seemed lonely, as happy as Sonic was for the company.

That night, the children returned. They brought Sonic and the man down to the riverbank and turned it to glass again. They motioned to come, but Sonic knew they did not mean him. He watched the man take off his shoes and make the walk across the sand; Sonic cringed with each crunch, remembering the pain he swore he hadn't felt at the time.

The children gave this man only a single shard with his blood on it, the others they took with them.

This cycle continued, but at a faster rate. Every couple days, Sonic and the man (and eventually a settlement of men) would wake to a man or two unconscious on the banks of the river. They would meet the men, feed them, and that night the children would come for initiation. Unlike him, none of the others were allowed to keep any sort of name. They all came to be known as Walkers, Wardens, or Messengers of one physical description or another, but as far as he knew, society at large just called them all Walkers.

It wasn't until after a month or so, when the children presented him with his robes that Sonic found out what they had been doing with the pieces of glass they took with them. It was an amazing thing to see for the first time. Glass that bent and shifted, yet reflected perfectly, somehow molded onto a silk robe. It was unearthly, divine. The silk underneath moved and rippled over his body, but the glass remained still, like a placid lake hiding the currents beneath. That was the meaning Sonic had taken from the gift of the robes, and it had been the goal of his meditations.

That was also the day they had sanctified the spot. They had told him that the robes alone would allow him to pass the barrier between the holy hill and the rest of the world. All others who tried would meet with immediate destruction. There was no demonstration, Sonic and the others took the children at their word.

Sonic broke from his meditation, looking at himself in the mirror. He looked like a warrior in magic armor. All he required now was a direction, an adversary, to face on behalf of the children.

The radio crackled. Sonic stood still, as if trying to silence the ambient sounds of the forest with his example.

"Little River," the voices echoed over the static. "Wind and air meet at the banks, the storm breaks upon the trees."

The radio crackled a few more times, then was silent. *It is decided.*

Sonic walked to the spot and called down to his Wardens.

"Spread the word," he yelled. "The children say we are to gather at Little River." Cheers made their way up to his ears from the bottom of the hill. "It has begun."

Ellen

Ellen was nervous as she sat in the car that Congressman Leonard had sent to bring her to the press conference. Ron was silent beside her. She could tell that he was a little uncomfortable with the whole thing.

"It's not like we can organize a search party, Ellen," he had said in his last effort to dissuade her. "This is between us and the Chinese authorities. I don't think they'll like being shown up like this."

Ellen had almost slapped him. "What should we do then, Ron? Should we let them keep doing what they've been doing?" She was so mad that she got right in his face, put her finger right in his chest. She hadn't yelled at him like that in a long time. "You don't want to piss them off? What are they going to do, Ron, make Aryana more lost? Are they going to do a worse job of finding her? I don't think so."

She had grabbed her purse, which matched the dark purple dress that Congressman Leonard's people had bought for her, and marched out to the waiting car. She and Ron hadn't

spoken since they got in the car, and she didn't think they would until this whole press conference thing was over.

"Are you all right, Mrs. Bucks?" said a young woman named Shelly. The Congressman had been called at the last moment to a very important meeting, but he had promised Ellen that Shelly was more than able to handle this.

"I'm fine, honey, thank you," Ellen said.

"Do you have any questions?" Shelly said. "I'm sure this is your first press conference."

Ellen had a lot of questions. She had been so flustered, so angry at Ron, that she had missed most of what the prep people had told her back at the house. Should she open with a joke, *probably not*. Should she cry? When should she cry? How much information should she give? She didn't want to bore them. What was she supposed to accomplish? Should she tell people to write letters? Raise money? Go to China and look for Aryana? The more she thought about it, the more she thought Ron had been right and that this was all just a stunt for the sake of Congressman Leonard's reelection.

"What should I say first?" Ellen finally said.

Shelly smiled, as she did before she did anything as far as Ellen could tell.

"Start with the picture of Aryana. Talk about her school, her friends, sports she played, where she wanted to go to college."

Ellen's eyes started to water. She hadn't recalled all of these things about her daughter almost since she'd gone missing. Shelly put her hand on Ellen's. "Let the public get to know your daughter, Mrs. Bucks," Shelly said. "Congressman Laurence will take care of the rest."

She patted Ellen's hand and smiled again. Ellen looked over at Ron who was staring out the window. She took her husband's hand and laced their fingers together. He took her hand and squeezed it tight, never taking his eyes from the window.

She thought about what Congressman Leonard had told her. "We need to take this problem to the people," he had said. "All of the people, Mrs. Bucks. And they will take it to their congressmen and senators. This is how you put pressure on foreign governments, by using your own."

At the time, Ellen had only nodded. She was just happy that someone was listening, helping her get some answers.

The car stopped and Ellen looked out at the steps and pillars of city hall. It loomed, with its marble and granite, its carvings and Latin. Then she remembered that this was an American building in an American city with American citizens waiting to hear her story. She was going to bring it all to bear on China, to find her baby.

Four men in black suits helped Ellen, Ron, and Shelly out of the car. The crowd was not dense, but the men cleared a path as forcefully as if it were. They led the group up the steps, past the pillars, and into the building. Ellen was confused. She looked over at Shelly.

"Excuse me," Shelly said. "We were supposed to go to the podium. The cameras were already on."

None of the men answered. None of them said anything until Shelly tried to stop.

"This way, Miss," the man in front said. "We're in meeting room A just around the corner."

"Who is?" Shelly said. "Congressman Laurence said we were going straight to the podium to give the speech and take a few questions. Who are you anyway?"

Ron grabbed Ellen's hand and led her toward Shelly. It was only at this point that the four men in suits stopped.

“Tell us what’s going on,” Ron said.

Three of the men stood there looking at Ellen, Ron, and Shelly, but one stepped forward. He was older with deep set eyes. His smile was more a smirk and it showed the single dimple on the right side of his face. As he walked forward, he said something into his wrist. Ellen couldn’t hear his words, but she had seen enough movies to know that the man was speaking into a radio.

“Everything is all right, folks,” the man said. “We’re just here to take you to our boss. My name is Cole, we’re with the NSA.” Mr. Cole pulled out his badge and handed it to Shelly for inspection. “Just follow us into the meeting room and you’ll get all the information that can be given.”

Shelly closed the leather casing with the badge in it and handed it back to Mr. Cole. Ellen and Ron looked at her. She gave a nod and moved forward. Ellen and Ron followed.

Ellen saw two more men in suits as they approached meeting room A. They stood outside the door, hands at their side. They were like figures at the Wax Museum. Even as the group passed them to enter the room, they didn’t move.

When they got inside, the four men split, two on either side of Ellen, Ron, and Shelly. Mr. Cole directed them to their seats. At the opposite end of the table was a man with graying hair. He had pointed features and a prominent nose. Except for the big grin, he seemed harmless enough. He smiled like he was a child playing a game and his exuberance unnerved Ellen. Once the group was seated, the man at the end of the table stood up slowly.

“My name is of no consequence,” he said. “But you can call me Mr. Poole.” He stared at them a moment. “I, like the fine men you’ve already met, am with the NSA, and feel we may be able to provide some answers for you.”

Mr. Poole was neither small nor large; he was not attractive, but by no means ugly. He was as ordinary in appearance as he was peculiar in demeanor.

“Answers to what, Mr. Poole?” Ron said.

“You have questions about your missing daughter.” He opened a manila envelope in front of his seat. “Aryana K. Bucks. Born June 6, 1992. Attended Glendale Elementary, Del Mar Heights Middle School, and Del Mar Heights High School. She played softball, and was a cheerleader. She recently disappeared during her term as an exchange program in the Shandong Province of China.”

Ellen didn’t know what to do, what to say. She wondered why the NSA was involved, if it was normal for them to take action in all cases of Americans missing abroad. She wished Ron would ask a question.

“What do you know?” Ellen said, almost without meaning to.

“A lot,” said Mr. Poole. “But most of it is classified. Ask me some questions and I’ll answer them if I can.”

She could feel his eyes scanning her face, looking for weakness, emotion, something he could play on. She could see that he had a job to do, nothing more. Ellen wondered how this would work. Was it like wishes? Would she only get three questions? Were there some things she would rather not know?

While she was considering which question to ask, she heard Ron say, “Is Aryana alive?”

Ellen held her breath. She didn’t know why he would ask that question. Damnit Ron.

Mr. Poole was quiet for a couple seconds. Ellen wished she could see what he was thinking.

“We are not sure, Mr. Bucks,” Mr. Poole said.

“Do they have any leads?” Ron said. “We haven’t heard back from any Chinese authorities and my wife has written and emailed everyone the embassy told her to.”

Ellen couldn’t stand Mr. Poole’s wandering about the room. It made her uneasy. He looked as if, at any moment, he could be gone and nobody would know where to find him; like he was always ready to make a quick getaway.

“Your daughter’s disappearance is just part of widespread disappearances across China. It’s becoming an epidemic of sorts, but our reports are very few with very large gaps between correspondence.” He regarded an unoccupied corner of the room. “China has been very quiet lately.”

“You didn’t answer the question,” Ellen said. “My husband asked you if they had any leads.”

Mr. Poole smiled as he had when they had first entered the room, and when he responded to Ellen he sounded like he was talking to a child. “They are pursuing many possibilities, Mrs. Bucks.”

“Could you let us know what any of these possibilities are?” Ellen said, getting sterner now.

“We have mixed reports,” he said, still smiling. “Some of our intel says that it’s the government, some say it’s rebels, and there’s a growing belief in the countryside that there are supernatural entities to blame.” He was beginning to sweat and took a handkerchief out of his pocket to dab his forehead. “My money is on one of the first two being the case.”

“Why mention the ‘entities’ then?” Shelly said. “If they’re totally ridiculous, why bring them up. Are you making fun of Mr. and Mrs. Bucks’ situation?”

Mr. Poole’s smile flattened and he regarded Shelly coolly. “It’s an organizational matter. It was fresh in my mind, I meant no disrespect.”

Shelly seemed satisfied by his response. Either that or the shift in Mr. Poole’s demeanor had made her less inquisitive.

“So are you working with the Chinese authorities?” Ron said. “Could you update us about changes in the case?”

“We are in the field,” Mr. Poole said, cleverly avoiding the question. “And we will let you know if anything is discovered about your daughter,” – he glanced down at the file in the manila envelope – “Aryana.”

Ron nodded, and Ellen and Shelly were quiet for about a minute. Ellen was trying to think of something else to ask, but every question would require an answer to the first. Ellen wished she could just know one way or the other. She wanted to know whether to grieve or to wait for her little girl to come home again.

“We wanted to let you know that the government is currently doing everything in its power to bring your daughter home.” He waited for forced smiles and nods from the group. “That being said, you will see that this press conference is unnecessary. Stirring up the public would create undue attention and stress on our department and hinder our ability to do our job. Given that this has been labeled a national security issue, you are to make no public statements about the situation or share any information acquired in this meeting.”

Ellen was dumbfounded. It was hitting her all at once, the magnitude of the forces that her daughter was caught up in. She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream. She wanted to grab that file out of Mr. Poole’s hand and write how Aryana squinted when she smiled and how she used texting acronyms verbally. She wanted to write how Aryana was so graceful but completely self-conscious about dancing in public. She wanted to put the real facts about her daughter in that

file; the things she missed most. Ron just looked at the floor. He was so damned non-confrontational. He grabbed Ellen's hand on the way out and she almost yanked it away.

Mr. Poole put the manila envelope in his briefcase and snapped it shut. "Your government is hard at work for you. Don't worry, Mr. and Mrs. Bucks." He went to leave, but as he was in the doorway he turned. "Take as long as you need, the cameras won't be there to bother you when you leave."

Lieutenant Maoki

Lieutenant Maoki sat in his office, as he had for the past eight days, wading through reports of more disappearances. With each passing week, the reports were coming in higher frequency. Lieutenant Maoki was reading through a report from a village north of Chansha, on the Yangtze River. The report was very run-of-the-mill until Lieutenant Maoki came to a curious footnote:

There were three plastic changing booths along the back of the beach that had steel frames, hinges, and doorknobs. The forensic team found these steel components to be highly magnetic. This anomaly remains unexplained.

Lieutenant Maoki rose from his desk, grabbed his keys from his coat pocket, and headed to the evidence room. He found the necklace and the forensics report that went with it on the shelf where he had left them. He signed the evidence log and took the necklace back to his office. He opened the forensics report on the necklace and thumbed through it until he found the section about the magnetism.

Necklace made of steel balls with chrome shell. The necklace's magnetic field is constantly weakening. This means it was magnetized by some highly magnetic source, but none was found at the scene. The phenomenon remains unexplained.

"Chen," Lieutenant Maoki said. "Get in here and close the door."

Chen trudged over from his desk and closed the door softly behind him. He'd been doing a lot of trudging ever since one of his cousins had been taken from a northern village. It seemed like everyone knew someone who was missing and the fact that they all sulked instead of trying harder was starting to get on Lieutenant Maoki's nerves. He had expected his young deputy to be spurred on by this, but it seemed to have crushed him and, for that, Lieutenant Maoki pitied and despised him.

"Yes, sir," Chen said as he closed the door.

"Chen, I would like you to find out what Generals are in the area and schedule an appointment for me with whoever it may be."

"I think General Chun is in the area, sir," Chen said. "I'll get in touch with his people."

"Yes," Lieutenant Maoki said. "But before you schedule an appointment, make sure he has access to some researchers and facilities. I'm going to need some military minds to work on this new lead."

The prospect of a new lead seemed to alleviate some of Chen's sluggishness for the moment, and, for that, Lieutenant Maoki was glad.

Lieutenant Maoki waved Chen out of the room before picking up the magnetic necklace again. He twisted it between his fingers and felt it cling slightly to his wedding band. He hated this necklace, but he hoped that he wouldn't hate it much longer. Lieutenant Maoki was sure that, somehow, this necklace was an important clue.

He decided he couldn't wait on the pleasure of some General. He was going down to the scene with the magnetized changing rooms. If he turned the police lights on, it was only about a twenty minute drive.

He thought about taking Chen with him, but ultimately decided against it. He was so discouraging lately. Lieutenant Maoki tried to listen to some classical music on the way to the beach, but none of the channels came in clearly and he heard more static than music so he decided to call ahead to the local police department and let them know he was coming to the scene so that he could avoid any misunderstandings.

"Hello," Lieutenant Maoki said. "My name is Lieutenant Maoki. I'm head of the state team investigating the disappearances."

The woman on the other end of the line sounded bored with the prospect of having to perform any action that may be construed as part of her job. He could hardly hear her with all of the static on the line, but eventually he gathered that she had told him to hold and that she would transfer him to the local police chief's office as soon as she could.

"Hello, my name is Chief Yilee," said a man with a deep, gravelly voice. "What can I do for you today, Inspector?"

"Hello to you as well," Lieutenant Maoki said. "I just wanted to inform you that I'm on my way to your glass beach to look over some interesting things I was reading in the report."

The pause on the other end was long enough to make Lieutenant Maoki think he'd been cut off or that his damn phone had dropped yet another call, but eventually he heard a deep, stiff throat clearing and he knew the man was still there.

"Of course, sir," said Yilee. "Is it a certain piece of evidence you wish to see?" Yilee cleared his throat again. "If you don't mind me asking, of course; because some of the evidence is already in the evidence room here at the station."

Lieutenant Maoki didn't know if it was necessary to tell the man what he was going to look at. He was sure that the changing booths would not have been hauled back to the evidence locker yet. He decided it would appear less suspicious and give less credence to the government conspiracy rumor if he was straightforward.

"I'm sure the evidence I'm looking for is still there," Lieutenant Maoki said. "I just want a look at those changing rooms."

Yilee was in the process of clearing his throat as Lieutenant Maoki finished, and at the mention of the changing room, his throat clearing turned into a coughing fit.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, still coughing a little. "But those were already requisitioned into the federal archives this morning."

Lieutenant Maoki didn't know what to think. Outside of the military, he was the only person who would be able to confiscate evidence like that.

"Oh," Lieutenant Maoki said. "Well, could you please tell me who requested them, or under whose authority they were requested?"

"One second, sir." There was a rustling of papers and an opening and slamming of drawers followed by some seconds of silence. Lieutenant Maoki could hear the rattling of the phone being picked up again.

"The changing booths in question," said Yilee, "were requisitioned earlier today by one Admiral Hosaka." Yilee made a clicking sound with his mouth which indicated to Lieutenant Maoki that he was reading further. "I'm sorry, sir, but that's all that's on the paperwork. You know these military guys, they just sign their names at the bottom and take whatever they want."

Lieutenant Maoki thanked the man for his time and hung up. He was shocked and confused. Until now he hadn't really believed the government could be behind the disappearances.

When he got back, he rushed through the bullpen and went straight to his office.

"Chen," Lieutenant Maoki said. "Get in here and close the door."

Chen did so as sluggishly as he had before. It seemed that the uplift at the prospect of more evidence had a very fleeting effect on his spirits.

"Yes, sir," Chen said once he was in the office. "A man came looking for you while you were out, Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Maoki had not been expecting anybody, but people often showed up looking for him, asking if there had been any breaks in the case.

"Did he leave a name?"

"No," Chen said. "He just waited in your office for about twenty minutes and said he would try back another time."

Lieutenant Maoki employed all of his strength not to throttle Chen right there.

"You let him in my office?"

Chen answered quickly and defensively. "He was in uniform, sir, and he left a card."

Lieutenant Maoki still was not impressed, but he needed Chen to skulk as little as possible, at least for the rest of the day, so he let it pass.

"Did you schedule that appointment with General Chun yet?" Lieutenant Maoki said.

"Yes, –"

"Well, call back and cancel it," Lieutenant Maoki said. "With my, apologies of course."

Chen slouched and nodded. He seemed disappointed; it must have taken some good amount of work for him to get a meeting in the first place, but, somehow, he managed to maintain a look of total apathy.

"Should I tell them why, sir?" Chen said.

"Tell them I've found another source," Lieutenant Maoki said. "And I don't need to bother General Chun anymore." Chen turned to leave. "Wait," Lieutenant Maoki said. "I also need you to get me an appointment with a man named Admiral Hosaka. He's the man I need to see."

As Chen shambled out the door, Lieutenant Maoki picked up the magnetic necklace that he'd left on his desk and began rolling it through his fingers. As he rolled it, it felt, somehow, completely different. It looked the same, weighed the same, the smoothness was familiar, but it didn't feel right in his hands.

When one of the steel balls clicked over his wedding ring he knew. It wasn't magnetic. It wasn't clinging to the ring anymore.

"Chen," Lieutenant Maoki yelled.

This time, Chen was in no way sluggish responding.

"Yes, sir," he said, nearly trembling.

"Get me the security tapes that have that man on them. I think he took something."

Chen nodded and almost ran from the office, only darting back in quickly to leave the mystery man's card on Lieutenant Maoki's desk before rushing down to the security desk.

Lieutenant Maoki read the business card.

Lan Xhoa

Lieutenant Admiral, P.R.C.S. Quing

Lieutenant Maoki smiled, holding the fake necklace in his hand. He now had hope in this case he had not felt in some time. His meeting with Admiral Hosaka would be quite enlightening.

Sonic

Sonic stood on a makeshift podium between two strong oaks. He was flanked on each side by a Warden. The men who had come from Little River sat cross-legged on the ground. They all stared in silent wonder at him – the robes tended to have that effect. As he moved so did they, probably enthralled by how perfect the reflections remained even as Sonic moved and gestured.

“You men and your wives, your families, have nothing to fear,” Sonic said. “The children are immortal, invincible to the force of man’s weapons.”

The men nodded, but their faces disagreed. They had questions, concerns, they were just too intimidated by the Wardens and Sonic’s strange robes to ask them.

“It is all right,” Sonic said. “Questions and doubts are expected.”

The men looked at one another, all of them seeming to hope another would ask the first question. A man stood.

“Hello, Sonic, my name is Ming Han.”

“Hello, Ming Han,” Sonic said. “What is your concern?”

He looked at the other men. They all seemed to be urging him to speak, as if they all knew what he was going to ask.

“How do we know these children are even real?” he said. “How do we know you’re not all crazy?”

Sonic smiled. He had looked forward to this question. He wanted nothing more than to showcase the power of the children – to be a conduit for their glory.

“Do any of you have a gun?” Sonic said, stepping down from his podium.

The men all looked at each other fearfully, as if it was a trap. They had been told not to bring weapons of any sort.

“Of course not,” one of them said.

“You said we shouldn’t,” said another.

“I know that,” Sonic said. “But I assume one of you did anyway.” He looked around, trying to guess which one it was. “No better way to make sure someone brings a gun than to tell them to come unarmed.”

He smiled and looked at the big man whose expression seemed to be faltering. When their eyes met, Sonic held his gaze until the man sighed and stood.

“And you are?” Sonic said.

“Lee Ho,” he said, pulling a gun from behind his back. “It’s an old pistol.” He handed it to Sonic handle first, but Sonic refused.

“Shoot me,” Sonic said, taking some steps back and squaring up to the big man.

None of the men moved, not even to exchange glances with one another. They all just stared at Sonic. The big man didn’t move.

“It’s all right,” Sonic said. “Just take aim and pull the trigger. I’ll turn around if you like.” Sonic turned around.

“Where –”

“Anywhere,” Sonic said. “Head, back, leg, arm, whichever you like.”

Sonic could hear the paralysis behind him. He almost laughed. He couldn’t wait to see the looks on the men’s faces after they were witness to the power of the children.

He heard the gun cock. For maybe a minute all that could be heard were the sounds of the forest. Sonic could picture the big man standing there, shaking – afraid to fire, not because he was scared to kill a man, but because he was scared he would not.

A shot rang out through the forest – then a pause. The gun was cocked again and fired more quickly. It was fired again and again. With each shot, Sonic could feel the robes react, pulsing outward with an invisible force, intercepting the bullet. Sonic counted six shots and turned around. The big man had moved closer. He was no more than five feet from Sonic now, the gun shook in his hand – fear and confusion ran rampant across his face.

“It’s all right,” Sonic said, gently taking the gun from the man and lowering his arm. “Please, retake your seat.”

The big man shambled back to his spot and collapsed into a sitting position, looking forward, not at Sonic, but at some question he couldn’t imagine the answer to.

“How did you do that?” Ming Han said, standing as before but, this time, on shaking legs.

“That was the power of the children,” Sonic said. “No weapon of man can harm the children or any of their disciples.”

Ming Han sat back down and joined the other men who appeared to be shaken and deeply contemplative. After some minutes, the big man stood again.

“If your children are so powerful,” he said hesitantly. “Why do they not show themselves? Why are you here instead?” The man got bolder, stepping forward, pointing his finger. “How do we know this was not a parlor trick? We met you here. This spot could be rigged.”

Sonic smiled. He had dealt with denial from many of his brothers during and after their initiation – handled accusations of trickery, deceit, and even complete rejection of what they’d seen.

“Why does God not meet every child when they enter this world? Or Allah, Jehovah, or any other deity?” Sonic turned and retook his spot at the podium. “Because they require your faith, gentlemen.”

Some men seemed content with his answers. Others seemed to be searching for a retort. None of them seemed certain one way or the other.

“Do not worry, friends,” Sonic said. “The children themselves will be here in three days time. You need not sustain on faith alone for long.”

Some of the men looked frightened, others doubtful, but all of them had a hint of intrigue and anxiousness to them.

“We will reconvene then,” Ming Han said. “There is no need to debate something that will be answered for certain in so short a time.” He approached Sonic, no longer shaking. “If you require hospitality, you may stay with me. My father would be honored to host an ambassador, though he need not know for whom you speak.”

Sonic was surprised and a little excited. He hadn't stayed in a house, slept in a bed for at least five months.

"Do you have room for my Wardens?" Sonic gestured back to the human mountains still flanking the podium on either side.

Ming Han smiled.

"Their feet may hang off the beds, but there are beds enough."

Sonic laughed.

"Thank you, my friend. I look forward to our coming days together." Sonic bowed. "Perhaps, by the end, we will call you brother."

Ming Han smiled, but it was only out of politeness. *He did not yet believe.* It was no matter. When the children came he would ask for robes. They would all ask for robes.

On the second day of his visit, Ming Han invited Sonic to go with him to fish the river. Sonic agreed. He hadn't realized how long it had been since he'd actually been fishing with just a pole. Before the children, fishing had been his job. He'd used a drag net and traps. He hadn't just used a rod and line since he was a boy.

"Thank you," Sonic said as he put his toes in the water and cast his line as far as he could. "It's beautiful out here."

"Yes, it is," Ming Han said. He moved his head as if he were going to ask a question, but stopped short.

"What is it?" Sonic said. "Please, ask."

"What's your real name?" Ming Han blurted. "I mean, I was just wondering."

"Sonic is my real name now." He watched Ming Han's face. He was not satisfied with that response. "Before the children found me, I was called Tai Ling." The smile faded from Sonic's face. "Not often though. Not many people really knew I existed before."

He could feel Ming Han looking at him, but Sonic decided to let it pass. The water was so beautiful shining off the surface of the river – he didn't want to look away anyway. He was waiting for the questions he had expected: where is your family? Your wife? Kids? Brothers? Sisters? But they never came, and that made Sonic smile.

"Your father reminds me a lot of mine," Sonic said.

"Sorry to hear that." Ming Han laughed, but Sonic could tell he was only half joking.

"I remember feeling the same way," Sonic said. "He was tough, overbearing, always looking over my shoulder. I left his house and went out on my own. By the time I realized all he'd given me, he was gone and I could never tell him."

Ming Han seemed to be simply nodding along as if this story didn't apply to him, but Sonic knew that it did. He just hoped that Ming Han would realize it sooner than he had. Sonic thought a lot about his father – especially lately with all that time to think on his holy hill.

"So do the fish ever bite?" Sonic said, casting his empty line back into the river for what seemed like the thousandth time.

"They're more the nibbling variety." Ming Han laughed. "The only things that bite out here are the mosquitoes."

Sonic laughed within himself and nearly cried. *The only things biting are the mosquitoes,* was what his father used to say to him whenever he started packing up the gear after a bad day of fishing.

“That’s all right,” Sonic said. “Better no fish and good company than a full net and an empty heart.”

Ming Han nodded and recast his line.

“So what do they look like?” Ming Han said.

“The children?” Sonic said, caught a little off guard. “They are unsettling at first, I suppose.” Ming Han was staring at him, urging more detail. “They are small, no taller than a young boy –”

“How young?”

“Ten, maybe twelve.” Ming Han nodded, again urging Sonic to continue. Sonic was uncomfortable and he didn’t understand why. “They have a strange skin I can’t really describe. It is magnificent white and it glows with its own light, but some are covered in a thick, black layer as if they have been burned.”

“Do they have arms and legs, like us?”

“Yes, but no eyes, ears, or noses,” Sonic said. “They can see though. They can definitely see, and hear too.”

Describing the children was unnerving. Actually discussing their appearance made Sonic think about how inhuman, how alien, they looked. He wondered if next time he saw them he would shudder or look away.

Sonic became angry with himself. *They are beautiful, magnificent beings, much better than people.* The children were in touch with nature. They respected all life and took it upon themselves to protect the world from humanity.

Sonic touched his chest. He missed his robes. He had stored them in his chest at the Walker camp before he’d made his way to Ming Han’s house after the demonstration in the woods. He felt his connection to the children slipping away every second. He felt vulnerable.

“So why are the children helping us?” Ming Han said. “Why now? Why here? What are they getting out of this?”

“I do not know their plans,” Sonic said. “I am only a wave, their voice. I speak their words to the world. All I know is that your land is poisoned and they will have it purified. Man and creature alike should be able to sustain themselves on the water and greens of the land.”

“But –”

“They are the keepers of the Earth,” Sonic said. “All they do, they do for love of life, not hate of man.”

For some time, the two of them took to silently casting, reeling, and recasting their lines. Sonic looked at the surface of the water where his hook and bait made ripples. He thought of the night he watched the children walk from the river to meet him. He had never counted how many there were. He’d always been too stunned. He wondered if that was all of them, the ones who’d come to the settlement. They were so beautiful, incredible, but in the most indescribably terrible way.

“I do not know what they are or what their aims are,” Sonic said, unprompted. He turned to look Ming Han in the eyes. “But I do know that they mean to do good.”

Ming Han nodded, but it was not the polite nodding from earlier. This nod, at the very least, seemed to mean that Ming Han trusted him – knew that he meant and believed what he said.

“We should probably get back,” Ming Han said. “Dinner will be ready soon.”

“And I suppose your father is not the greatest supporter of tardiness.”

Sonic smiled at Ming Han out of the corner of his eye. Ming Han nodded and smiled back.

As Sonic reeled in, his line stopped. At first he thought it was snagged or the reel had jammed, then he heard the drag. Suddenly, he was eleven years old.

“I’ve got one,” he said.

Ming Han placed his pole and tackle box on the shore and waded into the river knee-deep.

“I can’t see it,” Ming Han said.

“It definitely feels big,” Sonic said, straining as hard as he could against the pole without snapping it.

The fish jumped out of the water about ten feet away from Ming Han. *It was getting tired.*

“I think it’s a Tilapia,” Ming Han said.

Sonic thought so too, but he said nothing. He wanted to land it – wanted it more than he’d thought he would.

After a couple minutes of fighting, Sonic got the fish flopping onto the beach. He put his foot on its side so he could position his hands safely around the fins.

“That’s the first fish I’ve seen caught in this river in weeks,” Ming Han said. “And it’s a big one.”

Sonic smiled. It was big – and beautiful. It was a vibrant, healthy red, and its scales glistened in the setting sun. He looked at Ming Han.

“After the children come and drive the military away –” he glanced down at the fish – “The river will brim with fish like this one.”

Ming Han smiled and nodded. Sonic could tell that he did not yet believe, but he did hope.

Chun Kai

It was hot as Chun Kai rode in the jeep next to his new brothers in arms: Tien was driving. All the others had switched to different vehicles after only a short time of Chun Kai’s attitude. His new unit played awful American rap music. Chun hated it; he was an AC/DC man himself. He didn’t talk much and he got the feeling that the rest of the group didn’t like him that much. He didn’t care. All of his brothers had died on the beach the night of his party. They had followed him and died – he was sure he’d make a splendid butcher someday, probably not an officer though.

The rest of the unit was in the other jeep behind them. They were at the head of a convoy of about twenty unit transports, about 2,000 men. Chun thought it was a little overkill for an evacuation job, especially one as small as Little River, but he didn’t really care how much manpower the government wanted to waste at this point.

“What’s up, boss?” Tien said. “You’ve been pretty quiet this whole trip and Yin is sleeping.”

Chun had come to dislike Tien because he loved to talk so much, and he never called Chun sir as he was supposed to. Tien acted like they were long-time friends who could ignore the manners of military hierarchy. Even Ko had called him sir.

“Tien,” Chun said. “Call me sir; I’m your commanding officer.” That seemed to take the wind out of Tien’s sails more than Chun had wanted. “I’m sorry I’ve been so quiet, I’ve just had a lot on my mind.”

Tien just nodded, never taking his eyes off of the road.

“Well, sir,” Tien said, with special emphasis on the sir. “I’m a good listener if you feel like keeping me awake so I can keep this jeep on the road.”

Chun didn’t really feel like talking about it, but Tien seemed to get increasingly anxious and disheartened every second Chun continued his silence. He had hoped to be allowed to sit in silence all the way to Little River, but it didn’t appear as though Tien was going to let him.

“Okay, Tien,” Chun said. “I’ll talk until Yin wakes up.” This seemed to make Tien much happier. He smiled so wide that his eyes closed for so long that Chun was sure he’d drive off the road. “But understand, Corporal,” Chun said. “Anything that I tell you is to stay between us.”

Tien held a very serious expression. “Of course, sir.”

“Good,” Chun said. “Do you know who my father is, Tien?”

“Yes, sir. Yin told all of us who you and your father were the day we got the news you were to be in charge.” Tien looked back to make sure Yin was still asleep before leaning in to whisper to Chun. “He was pretty salty about the whole thing, sir,” Tien said. “If not for you, he would have been given command.”

“I’m sure he had some choice words and names for my rank-pulling father,” Chun said. “When we get to the village I’ll tell him it’s all true.” Tien looked confused, so Chun decided to clarify the thought. “My father, Corporal, is a royal prick.”

Chun almost laughed as he watched Tien try to decide what to do with his face. After some seconds, he seemed to settle on a compromise, a slight smile with a firm nod as if to say, “Continue.”

“My father is such a prick,” Chun said, “that when I told him I’d be putting in my discharge papers after this mission he said, ‘*We’ll talk about it when you get back,*’ as if I’m still thirteen instead of a grown man.”

Tien gave an understanding smile. “My father is the same way, sir,” he said. “I think all fathers are.”

Chun reclined his seat a little to nudge Yin awake. He didn’t want to talk anymore. Chun tried to forget his father by enjoying the scenery. In the countryside, it was always beautiful. There were so many hills and trees to make the sunlight more interesting, and all of the villages always looked like postcards.

Yin and Tien started to talk, but Chun lost himself in memory while looking at the hills. When he was young, Chun’s mother had taken him and his sister to stay with her family in the countryside. She had told them it was a little vacation, but Chun knew that his parents were fighting. The house had been so small and rustic looking that Chun didn’t think he would possibly enjoy himself there. No computer, internet, or video games. He had no clue what he was supposed to do for fun.

His grandfather had tried to take him on nature hikes and fishing in the small river, but, back then, Chun had been too impatient to enjoy those things. After they’d been in the village about four days, Chun saw some boys about his age playing with wooden swords. They were jumping and swinging and rolling. He wanted to do it too, but he wasn’t going to ask to play with the village boys. Luckily, they asked him.

It had been Ko who asked him to play that day. He remembered the last time he’d seen his big friend, being dragged into the ocean, unconscious, a metal tentacle around his waist. He’d

dreamt of that night almost every night since. The glass, the screams, and that little black figure that Ko had tried to help, thinking it was a child. It couldn't have been a child. Chun was sure of that now.

All of a sudden, the scenery seemed drearier. The sun cast odd shadows through the trees and the hills themselves seemed to slouch. He wished he was with his old unit again – his friends. He couldn't stand the bureaucracy. He'd told his father what was happening. Chun wanted to go into the water and drag them out – dead or alive. They deserved to be buried and remembered. Cho's young son deserved to carry his father's sword one day. It would be a legendary sword. Cho had slain a monster with that sword, a demon; Chun really didn't know what to call it.

As they got to the top of a hill, the village appeared in the distance. A man was standing at the top of the next hill. When they got to him, it was clear that he was one of the Walkers.

"Turn back," he yelled. "Or face the wrath of the children. If you lose today, you do so for eternity. Retreat, there is no victory in that direction. I've been sent to warn you. They wish you no harm, but you must leave this place. Sonic urges you to desert this lost cause. Walk the land and preach the truth as my brother, and you will be spared."

Some of the soldiers cursed the man; some threw garbage and cans. Tien handed Chun an empty bottle, but Chun couldn't bring himself to throw it, so he just sat there. As they got out of range, Chun regretted not throwing the bottle. Chun couldn't stand Walkers ever since the incident. He had always been able to dismiss them as crazy, but he'd seen something he couldn't explain. He'd seen glass creep around his feet like the tide. He'd seen something barely more than a shadow drop Ko in a heap. He'd seen metal tentacles drag his brothers into the ocean.

Chun could see the Walker in the rear-view being pelted with debris. It didn't seem to faze him. He just kept repeating his message. Chun watched until the jeep was too far away. He imagined that the Walker was probably buried in old food and other garbage by the time the convoy had passed.

When the jeep finally entered the village, people were already packing up their homes. Bags sat outside doorsteps, chickens were stacked in cages, and Chun even saw a satellite dish every now and then. Tien stopped the jeep in the center of town and Chun hopped out. He grabbed the first man he saw. A big man, he reminded Chun of Ko.

"Who should I talk to?" Chun said. "Who is in charge?"

The big man looked sad and pointed to a smaller, younger man across the square. The man looked over just in time to see Chun staring and the big man pointing. He made his way over.

"My name is Ming Han," the man said. "How can I help you?"

Chun shook the man's hand. "My name is Captain Chun." Chun pointed to the big man. "That man over there said you're the man to talk to."

"Sort of," Ming Han said. "I'm the envoy, but my father is really in charge. He just doesn't like taking trips to the city anymore."

"Take me to him then," Chun said.

As they walked, Chun looked around at the villagers busy packing up their lives. He remembered when his grandparents had been forced from their village. It happened all the time. Cities were always expanding, too many people and too little room, and people didn't want to move to the villages and farm so it was easier to just make them move and build a skyscraping tombstone over land that had been in families for hundreds of years.

It made Chun sad, but he knew it made the villagers even sadder, probably even angry. Chun would have to keep his men in check; these men probably wouldn't take to being prodded too well. The big man had hardly even spoken to him.

They finally arrived at a house at the foot of a hill. It seemed to preside over all of the other houses. An old man stood on the porch, giving orders to two boys carrying things from the house.

"Careful, boys," he said. "My wife will bind your feet if you drop that vase."

The boys gave a little smile, but the man did not. Chun found himself looking at Ming Han's feet wondering if they'd ever been bound. Chun had never experienced it, but he'd heard awful things. It seemed discipline was alive and well in the countryside.

"Father," Ming Han said with a bow. "This is Captain Chun, he's in charge of the evacuation."

Mr. Ming gave a slight bow and Chun made sure to give a deeper one. Mr. Ming stood erect and had sharp features. He kept his hands behind his back and this made him seem to be constantly pondering something.

"Thank you, Han," Mr. Ming said. "You should probably go back and take care that the animals all loaded all right."

Ming Han bowed and briskly walked back to town. Chun knew that his father would like Mr. Ming, so he had decided that he didn't like him. Mr. Ming was the same height as Chun, but he seemed to be constantly looking down at him, always out of the bottom of his eye.

Mr. Ming put his hands behind his back. "So, Captain Chun, what would you ask of me?"

Chun wanted to say that he would ask nothing. He was in charge. He had the authority. But he couldn't say those things.

"We brought a truck for the rice harvest," Chun said. "We just want to know where –"

"There is no harvest," Mr. Ming said without looking at Chun. "Your people killed the rice when they started dumping upstream."

Mr. Ming looked at Chun as if he had polluted the land himself, and there was such disdain in his eyes that, for a second, Chun felt that he had.

"I'll just send the truck back then," Chun said.

Mr. Ming nodded and looked out toward the busy town.

"Will that be all, Captain Chun?"

Chun didn't like his tone. It was just like his father's whenever he asked a question. He managed to make it an order.

"For now, sir," Chun said.

Without a hand shake or a bow, Mr. Ming returned to his porch to order the boys around. Chun couldn't help but think that he was wrong; this man was a much bigger prick than his own father.

Chun headed back to the town square to make sure that his men weren't agitating the situation. Most of the soldiers were city kids who couldn't get normal jobs or didn't want them. They thought country people were dumb and uneducated so they treated them as inferiors. Chun knew better and was determined to keep his men in line. It's not as if they could like him any less.

As Chun was walking back, he saw one of his men walk over a little girl playing in the dirt. She held her elbow but did not cry. Chun helped the girl up and complimented her doll until she smiled. Then he yelled at the man who had trampled her and told him to walk to the back of the convoy and sit in the last truck. There were no more incidents after that.

When they got all of the villagers' possessions loaded on the trucks and made sure everyone was accounted for, Chun gave Tien the okay to go and the convoy started up again. The new settlement area was a forty-five minute drive on poor roads that would start getting steep toward the end of the journey. After a short distance the jeep behind Chun's drove up beside him. Ming Han was standing in the back trying to tell Chun something, but the engines were too loud. One of the men finally handed Ming Han his walkie talkie so that he could communicate.

"Captain Chun," Ming Han said. "I know an easier route than your planning."

Chun was a little exasperated that this little man thought he knew the land better than satellite mapping, but he felt sorry for Ming Han having a father like Mr. Ming; if anyone understood the importance of small victories in that environment, it was Chun.

"What did you have in mind?" Chun said.

"Take a left up here where the trees part," Ming Han said. "It will take us through a valley without a road, but the land is dry and it will save us time."

Chun thought about it for a minute before deciding that he didn't care if it pissed off the drivers of the trucks. He was in a jeep and it wouldn't affect him at all.

He signaled to Tien to turn left into the clearing and made sure to let the drivers know over the truck frequency.

When the jeep broke the tree line and got into the heart of the valley, Chun was happy with his decision. It was beautiful: green grass, a nice dirt path, and totally surrounded by trees except for the place that they'd entered by and a gap in the growth on the far side. But the more Chun looked at the trees, the darker they looked, like something was shrouding them. It seemed that the shadows were moving and Chun felt as if, at any moment, the tree line would close in on them, as if the shadows would consume them all.

They were about three quarters of the way through the valley when the jeep stopped. Chun tried the radio and couldn't hear any static. He flipped the switch for the emergency lights and they didn't come on. A crowd was forming at the back of the convoy. A soldier was running his way.

"Sir, some of the villagers are taking their things," the man said. "They're leaving, walking into the trees."

Chun froze for a second. The beach flashed in his head. The glass cracking under their feet. The little thing. The metal tentacles. No electronics.

Chun looked at his sidearm but then thought of Cho and his sword. "Clubs and knives out, men," Chun yelled as loudly as he could. "No guns, and don't let anymore of the people into the woods."

Chun headed toward the back of the convoy to get the villagers back into their transports, but as he rounded the front of one of the trucks he saw someone at the tree line. The Walker from the road was waving people on, telling them to come into the woods.

"Tien," Chun said. "Get that Walker and bring him here. He has something to do with this."

Tien headed toward the robed man. The Walker did not run. He seemed to pay no attention to Tien at all. He just kept motioning for people to come into the woods. Some of them were listening, but most of them feared the clubs and knives of the soldiers.

Tien was yelling at the Walker, but Chun couldn't hear exactly what he was saying. After a couple seconds, Tien charged toward the man but stopped short. He seemed frozen. After a couple seconds he slowly backed away and made his way back to Chun.

The color was gone from Tien's face.

"What was it?" Chun said. "What did you see?"

Tien just stared at Chun for a second as if he couldn't comprehend the question.

Tien held his hand up to about the middle of his chest. "It was small, sir," he said. "Like a child." Then Tien's eyes got wide. "But it had no eyes. I think it smiled at me. It didn't seem hurt, but it looked like it was badly burned." Tien looked at his boots. "At first I thought it was just a child, sir. A child in the shadows."

Chun had only seen it in the dark. He could only imagine the ghoulish thing that Tien had seen.

"Sit in the jeep, Tien," Chun said. "And tell no one what you saw."

Tien nodded and trudged back to the jeep.

"Guns up," Chun yelled. "All mounted barrels manned and ready. Defend the perimeter."

Chun surged through the crowd to find Mr. Ming. He was standing amongst the villagers, assuring them all that the situation was in hand.

"Mr. Ming," Chun said. "Please, can you get these people back on the transports?"

Mr. Ming smiled in a way that seemed to threaten and soothe all at once. "Of course, Captain," he said. "But, from what I can gather, these people are in no danger."

"I'll tell you all of the details when we're out of here, but for right now just trust that there is a threat in the area and that we need you to get into the transports."

"Everyone, please get back into the trucks," Mr. Ming said. But before he got in he turned to Chun and said, "I know what's happening, Captain. My son told me about the plan he and the other men made." Mr. Ming looked around at the tree line. "To be honest, I didn't believe them, but when all of the trucks stopped, well, I guess I couldn't deny it any longer."

"What plan?" Chun said. "How did they stop the trucks?"

Mr. Ming looked down at Chun as a parent looks at a child that is asking too many questions. "I have no idea." He looked over Chun's shoulder at the tree line. "Why don't you ask them?"

When Chun turned, the big man, Ming Han, and three other men were walking towards the convoy, carrying shiny metal rods. The thing was walking behind them. Tien was right. Even at a distance, it looked terribly burned and shriveled, but it walked as if nothing was wrong and moved its head as if it was looking at everything even though it didn't have any eyes. The men that walked in front of it didn't seem any less afraid of it than the soldiers. They kept glancing back at it and they seemed rigid.

Just one, Chun thought. He wanted to charge it and kill it with his knife and club as Cho had with his sword.

"Sir," one of the mounted gunmen yelled. "More on this side."

Chun looked and saw another group of village men with another little black shape behind them.

"Stay where you are," Chun yelled. "If you take another step we will fire on you."

The men hesitated but quickly resumed their march on the convoy.

Chun put his back to the men and faced the mounted gunmen. "Fire," he said. "Fire at will. Aim for the creatures."

As he said that, the shadows seemed to leave the forest. A swarm of these small, deformed things came walking out of the woods and stood about thirty yards away from the convoy. They did look like children.

“Fire,” Chun said almost as a whisper to himself at first. It took him a couple tries before he could shout it. “Fire!” he yelled, but as he yelled it he remembered the night at the beach. He heard the chain guns humming and the small explosions of bullets, but all he saw being hit was the tree line behind the black swarm. The bullets flew in all directions around them, but mostly overhead into the trees.

The swarm started to advance. It didn’t charge. It didn’t seem aggressive. It just walked as if it didn’t care when it got there, as if they knew there was no stopping them.

“Bats and knives, soldiers,” Chun yelled. “They do that trick with the bullets, but a nice beating and cutting does just fine for them.”

The sound of knives and clubs sliding from sheaths all seemed to happen at once. Chun looked to his right side, where he knew Ko would be if he were there.

The swarm was still advancing.

“Charge,” Chun yelled.

His men formed up in front of him and they charged the swarm of shadows. As they began to close the gap, Ming Han and the other men launched their metal rods at the trucks like javelins. They sunk in the ground a couple feet in front of the trucks and wobbled back and forth. All of the village men did this, and when all of the rods had landed it looked as if there were hundreds of thin, metal fence posts surrounding the convoy. This made Chun feel as though they may never make it back to the trucks.

After that, Ming Han and the others lay down on the ground and the swarm marched right over them. When Chun and his unit were about twenty yards from the children, he saw them put their left hands on the right shoulder of another and step their right feet on their other partner’s left, and one in ten had its right hand out.

All Chun saw was a flash and a tingle and he was looking up at the sky. He thought he’d heard a thunderclap, but maybe it had been just his head hitting the ground. He was shaking, but when he tried to move, he could only roll his head from side to side. He looked at the man next to him.

He was also shaking and confused, and Chun saw something in his eyes, when they met, that seemed to say, “I’m scared and I think this is your fault.”

Chun passed out, and when he woke, he was in a metallic room with no seams; as if it had just been formed from a single, giant piece of metal. Three of the demons stood around him. Except for rolling his head, he still couldn’t move. He wondered if any of them had been at the beach. Now that he had seen how many there were, it seemed improbable.

They stood over him for minutes studying his face and his eyes. He could feel them looking at him. They must have had eyes in there somewhere.

“Where am I?” Chun said.

The one directly over Chun smiled and looked at the other two and they all seemed to engage in the shared smiling that adults have when a child does something cute.

“Can I talk to Ko?” Chun said, hoping they would understand. “He was a big, bald man, he tried to help you that night on the beach.”

They seemed to wish they could help him. Chun thought they pitied him and this made him rage against his immobile limbs. They started attaching nodes to his temples and behind his ears. He tried rolling his head back and forth to keep them off until one of them put its finger in

the center of Chun's forehead and drew its mouth into a line as if to say, "Behave, or I'll do it again."

Chun wasn't quite sure what had happened the first time, but he knew he didn't want it to happen again. They made him open his mouth to clip a node on his tongue. It hurt, but Chun figured it could be worse.

Once all the nodes were attached, they walked to a monitor on the wall and hit a couple buttons. Chun was trying to get a look at their instruments, but it just seemed to be a screen with no keyboard or mouse pad.

After a couple beeps, Chun could feel a tickling coming from the nodes. It built to a vibrating, and eventually it was humming. One of them came over and held Chun's hand. He could feel the looseness of the burned skin as it moved its hand in his, some of the black came off and Chun saw a translucent white underneath. It was beautiful.

The one holding his hand reached down on the slab under his head and flipped a switch. Chun's whole face started to tingle. He closed his eyes and a strange sound filled his head and kept getting louder. Whirling, clicking, whirling, clicking – silence. Chun's vision exploded in a rainbow and then everything went black. He felt as if he was starting to go to sleep. Just before he passed out, he heard some people talking and a baby crying.

Then, he heard a voice he loved more than any other. His mother's voice. "Give him here," she said. "Let me hold him."

Sonic

The battle had been like nothing Sonic had expected. He had prepared himself for bloodshed, death, mutilation, but it had been so quick, so effortless. *They just zapped them all and took them away – the villagers too.* He had known that some of the villagers would be put into the sleep machines, but they had not been given a chance to join, to support the children. They were just taken, tagged, and stocked like cattle. He was so surprised, scared even, when it was all happening. He sent some of the Wardens away to let Ming Han and some other men escape – not all of them made it, but some did.

There had been so many of the children – more than Sonic had ever imagined. There were hundreds of them. Sonic wondered how many more there were. He now had the feeling that things were not as he had been led to believe. The battle and the aftermath didn't seem preordained or fated. They seemed strategic, tactical. Sonic got the feeling that the children were less than they had let on – and somehow more all at once.

The children had ordered many of the Walkers to go with them to the cities, but Sonic and the Wardens were on their way back to the holy hill. Perhaps it was because he'd aided in Ming Han's escape, perhaps not.

"We should rest, Master Sonic," the bald Warden said. "It will be dark soon."

"All right," Sonic said.

The Warden signaled to the others to prepare the camp. Sonic was not permitted to help so he just sat on a rock. One of the Wardens gathered firewood while the other two prepared simple tents. There were only three tents because one of the Wardens would always be awake, keeping watch, while Sonic and the other two slept.

Since the battle in the valley, Sonic had been thinking about the children and his position and everything that had happened in the last six months almost nonstop for the last three days. He hadn't cared what it all meant before, but he did now.

"Are you hungry, Master Sonic?" the firewood Warden said as he dropped his load. "There is light still to find something."

For the first time, Sonic stared into this Warden's eyes. They were a torrent – fear, confusion, anxiety, and on top of it all, a thin veil of gracious servitude. He wondered what this man's name had been.

"Food would be wonderful," Sonic lied. He wasn't hungry, but he knew the Wardens were and they wouldn't eat without him.

The Warden bowed, grabbed his quiver, bow, and the canteens before disappearing into the trees.

Once the other two finished the tents and started a fire, they sat down to play Mahjong. Sonic just sat away from them on his rock. He was always alone. All of the other disciples treated him as if he was one of the children and the children treated him as an instrument. He was supposed to be the ambassador between two worlds, but usually he felt more like he was in his own world, completely detached from any other living thing.

His day of fishing with Ming Han popped into Sonic's head, but it was gone as fast as it had come. He felt closer to Ming Han than he had felt to any person in a long time. That thought crushed him completely by surprise. Sonic just wanted to sleep. He felt more insignificant every second and he hoped sleep would bring him some reprieve, but he couldn't sleep until after they ate.

He tried to focus on the forest – the birds, the insects, the breeze, and the faint moon. He buried his toes in the dirt and felt it go in between them and under the nails. *Planting roots*. He just wanted to sprout leaves and forget his skin, to become an ageless tree, forever able to take in the sounds, scents, and magic of the Earth, uninterrupted.

Sonic sat like this, eyes closed, silent, taking in the forest, for what seemed like only minutes.

"I got a couple spoonbills," the Warden said holding up a string of birds strung up by their feet.

The Warden looked at Sonic. He smiled and nodded his congratulations. The big man beamed and presented Sonic with a canteen. It was brimming with water. Sonic hadn't realized how thirsty he was. He drank slow and deep, feeling the earthiness of the water as it ran over his tongue.

The Warden tossed a bird to each of the other Wardens still playing Mahjong. "Pluck them and let's eat."

They stopped their game and quickly plucked the spoonbills. Sonic could tell they were very hungry.

It didn't take long to cook the small birds over the fire. It was delicious, but Sonic didn't eat much.

"Is something wrong, Master?" the Warden that had done the cooking said. "Is your bird too dry?" He offered his to Sonic. "Please, take mine."

Sonic smiled and politely refused.

"No, it is delicious," Sonic said. "I simply have had more thirst than hunger." Sonic raised the canteen and took a drink. "This water is perfect."

Sonic bowed and excused himself. He hoped he had not hurt their feelings. The small meal had made him tired though. He went to his tent and lay on his simple bed roll.

Sonic fell asleep quickly. He dreamed. He had been having many dreams lately. It was as if they came in a sequence, a cycle. It had just begun to repeat for the third time.

In this dream, he was young, but it was not a memory. No, he was young now. He pictured a young version of himself being worshipped by the Walkers, speaking for the children. His robes were too big. They dragged on the ground, glass flaking and chipping as he walked, cutting his feet. He could not feel the pain, but he could see the tears on his young face.

He smiled often, but it was a sad smile. Sonic could see the pain in his own young eyes – pain and confusion and fear. Suddenly, the dream changed.

He heard radio static, garbled messages. This was new. The child Sonic did not react to the noise. It was as if it was in Sonic's own head, separate from the dream. The children were talking to the young Sonic. He knew what they were saying because it was the same every time, but he could not hear them. The static was too much.

He awoke. The radio was making noises.

"Away," he shouted at the sleeping Wardens. They were not permitted to hear the messages on the radio. "Away," he shouted again as the sleeping Wardens roused themselves. They hurried and scattered into the trees.

"Hello," Sonic said into the radio. "Hello, I am –"

The radio squealed and Sonic knew to be silent.

"A tide comes," echoed the strange, multi-tonal voices of the children. "It seeks the wrong shore." Sonic stared at the radio as if it had a face, as if it alone were speaking. "The rocks are away, it seeks the sand." There was a pause long enough that Sonic thought the transmission was over, but then the eerie rattle of voices came again. "The grass of the hill holds the sand against the tide's fury."

Another squeal and the radio was silent. *What did they mean?* He did not know why the children spoke this way. He did not think anyone else was listening. The children had told him this radio was unique in its ability to pick up their frequency. *Maybe the riddles and metaphors were a test. Maybe part of the meaning was in his interpretation.* But this had sounded like a warning. *A tide approaches.*

Sonic was unsure of the 'tide' the children spoke of, but he knew they were telling him to get to the hill, and they must have meant fast because that was already his destination.

"You may come back," Sonic called to the trees.

The Wardens emerged from the darkness of early morning in unison. Everything seemed gray in the predawn light. They stared their questions at him because they could not ask. It was above them to ask the words of the children, but Sonic could see that they wanted to just the same.

"We are to make haste for the holy hill," Sonic said. "Faster than before. We must hurry." The Wardens just stood, waiting to hear more, wanting to know their task. "Hurry," Sonic shouted. "Pack up, we must go. A tide approaches."

The Wardens hopped to their tasks. Sonic joined them. One of the Wardens moved to stop him, to insist that he do nothing, but Sonic met him with a glare. Sonic was not made of glass, regardless of how his robes made him look. He would take action. *The rocks are away* – Sonic would show them a rock, and he would break this wave upon his holy hill.

Congressman Laurence

Congressman Laurence sat in a chair much less comfortable than the one he'd occupied on his first class flight back to Washington D.C. He had been called back for a special meeting, but had been disappointed to find out that the meeting wasn't really all that special. Upon trying to leave, he had been met at the airport by four men in black suits. They had told him they were with the NSA. The man in charge had been named Cole. He was young, about thirty; he was short, but very thick and he had a permanently stern expression from what Congressman Laurence had seen of him.

They had taken him directly from the airport to a large hotel room, and that's where he'd been waiting for the past four days. From time to time, someone came in to see if he wanted anything. He'd gone through four cups of coffee and a nice steak from Franzetto's Steakhouse around the corner so far that day. He'd felt obliged to order something that couldn't be delivered in order to be as much a bother as possible. He hated waiting, especially since he'd had to leave his phone at the front desk. If they'd at least allowed him his phone, he could have called Shelly to find out how the press conference went.

As Congressman Laurence was getting up to request a piece of cheesecake from that same steakhouse, the door opened and four new men in suits walked in. None of them seemed to be Mr. Cole. One of them told him to follow. They started walking before he could object, so he did as he was told.

They led him to the elevator, out the front door, and into a large, black SUV that had been waiting. Congressman Laurence wanted to ask questions, but none of their faces cast them as the type to answer questions.

They soon arrived at a building that looked important and forgettable all at once. They led him inside, into another elevator, and it moved without them pressing a button. The lights indicating the floor of the elevator flashed – *B1, B2, B3*, then nothing, but the elevator was still moving. The doors opened directly into what appeared to be a conference room. The four men ushered him into his seat then silently took their places around the room. After a minute or so, a fifth man walked in who seemed to be in charge.

"Hello, Congressman," the man said. "My name is of no consequence, but you may call me Mr. Poole. Please, take a seat."

Mr. Poole seemed a man of slightly less than middle age. His suit was nothing special, but he had an exquisite watch. He had brown hair that was cut short and he seemed to let it fall as it would, and he had brown eyes that seemed to look nowhere in particular. He paced about the room as he talked.

"Hello, Mr. Poole," said Congressman Laurence. "I'm glad to finally have some company. I've been here for hours."

Mr. Poole's face seemed to soften, but it did not seem to apologize.

"An unfortunate circumstance," Mr. Poole said. "But the reason for my lateness, as well as the reason for this visit, was precipitated by you, so I hope you won't be too angry with me."

He smiled and Congressman Laurence sat sternly in opposition to the accusation.

"How is that, Mr. Poole?" Congressman Laurence finally said.

"Well, I had to cancel your press conference," Mr. Poole said in feigned defense. "That's normally a twelve hour trip, but I did it in nine in our Lear."

Congressman Laurence was about to swallow his tongue. If not for the other men in the room, and his own physical cowardice, he'd have choked Mr. Poole on the spot.

"And what gave you the right?" Congressman Laurence nearly shouted. "I'd had –"

Mr. Poole pulled a slip of tri-folded paper from his jacket pocket. "This, Congressman, gave me the right."

1 Injunction Against the Dissemination of Classified Operations Information

1.1 Prohibitions

This injunction against the publication of certain, delicate operations currently engaged in by certain government authorities is a civil tool that allows said authorities power to edit, abridge, or eliminate reports directly of or tangential to said operations. By imposing a range of prohibitions and requirements on the coverage of said operations, government authorities intend: 1 • to prevent public outcry and panic that may cause violence or general civil unrest; and/or • to protect the confidence of other foreign or domestic government agencies that may be involved. Over the medium and longer term, this injunction grants said government agencies the right to abridge or suspend freedom of the press in regards to any of the operations to that have been listed as under the protection of this injunction (1.23.34, section C)...

Congressman Laurence didn't need to read anymore. He knew a standard umbrella injunction when he saw one. They never named the agency to be given the problem or the ones it was working with, let alone stated the problem. To challenge the injunction he would need access to the classified information it protected. It was times like this when he remembered why he got into government. Even the signature was in the classified sections; for all he knew, the damn thing wasn't even signed.

"So," Congressman Laurence said, "I take it there was no meeting after all."

Mr. Poole just smiled and seemed to wink without winking as if to say, "Now you're catching on."

"If I may be so bold, Mr. Poole," Congressman Laurence began, "what are these 'threats to national security' this document alludes to?"

Congressman Laurence shifted in his chair, putting one leg over the other, attempting to appear at ease.

"They say fortune favors the bold, Congressman," Mr. Poole said as he paced his area at the front of the room. "But not today, I'm afraid."

Mr. Poole seemed to be working his way to the door. Congressman Laurence's window was quickly closing. He had to say something. He had to know. He needed something to work with. This press conference was all he had.

"I believe I've earned some answers, Mr. Poole," Congressman Laurence said. "You brought me here under false pretenses, I waited for three hours, deprived of communication, and this was all to allow you to cancel my very important press conference."

Mr. Poole only smiled his very condescending smile.

"Congresssman," he said. "We cancelled your press conference because the attention it was seeking to draw is already being given to the situation." He straightened his back and cocked his head to one side. "The press conference was to get the word out about the Bucks' missing daughter, was it not?"

Congressman Laurence adjusted his posture again while drawing his mouth into a tight line.

“Of course,” Congressman Laurence said. “I would just like to know how this became a matter of national security. I sit on the allocations committee for the NSA. I’m sure you won’t be telling me something I can’t find out.”

Congressman Laurence had to hide a smile as he saw Mr. Poole squirm a little in his collar. He could almost see the congressional purse strings tightening around Mr. Poole’s arrogant neck.

“I wonder how long you’ll sit –”

“Long enough,” Congressman Laurence said.

The two men regarded each other for a few seconds. Mr. Poole drifted away from the door.

“What would you like to know, Congressman?”

Congressman Laurence thought for a moment. He hadn’t actually thought of anything, specifically, he’d wanted to know, he just knew he wanted something for his trouble.

“Why is this girl’s disappearance a matter of national security?”

“She is not the only one,” Mr. Poole said. “The disappearances are very widespread throughout China.”

“How many are –”

“Seven hundred and thirty three thousand and some change,” Mr. Poole said. “According to our last reports.”

Congressman Laurence was dumbstruck. He had never imagined the number would be that high. How could something affect China’s population on that scale with no repercussions?

“I,” Congressman Laurence said with a stutter. “I never – how –” The questions all seemed to bottleneck on his tongue and he couldn’t get anything out. “It must be the government,” he said finally.

“We’ve looked into that,” Mr. Poole said. “And our best evidence suggests that it is not.”

The number flashed in Congressman Laurence’s head, *seven hundred and thirty three thousand*.

“How has nobody heard?” Congressman Laurence was looking at Mr. Poole but focused somewhere far behind him.

Mr. Poole put both fists on the table and leaned forward. He seemed to be exulting in the fact that he’d shocked Congressman Laurence into submission.

“Electronic communication coming out of China,” he said. “Has all but ceased. Once our operatives entered Chinese waters or air space, we lost radio contact. Our only communications have come through hand-written letters.”

Congressman Laurence had not expected any of this. It was so much; so unbelievable. He couldn’t wrap his mind around –

“Wait,” Congressman Laurence said. “If this is all happening in China, why is the NSA involved? Your jurisdiction is limited to things that threaten our nation. What are you doing helping –”

The look on Mr. Poole’s face told the congressman what he needed to know; it was as if he’d been waiting for Congressman Laurence to connect the dots. He smiled as much as the congressman frowned.

“Yes, Congressman,” Mr. Poole said. “We do believe that this problem will threaten the U.S., though we can’t say when, exactly.”

“What is this problem, Mr. Poole? Do you have any leads? Is it a revolution, terrorism, cyber terrorism? What could possibly put this kind of pressure on a government like China’s – in China of all places?”

Mr. Poole pressed his right finger into his ear. It looked just like in the movies when the secret service guy needs to hear where the gunman is. Mr. Poole kept nodding which seemed odd to Congressman Laurence because, to the best of his knowledge, whoever was speaking to him could not see him. Congressman Laurence looked around the room for cameras again. He saw none.

“Congressman Laurence,” said Mr. Poole suddenly. “I’ve told you all I can up to this point, but, if you want to know more, apparently we have need of you.”

All Congressman Laurence could think about was his mother had told him when he’d first gone to work in Washington: “Remember, Leonard, curiosity killed the politician.”

“How exactly,” Congressman Laurence said, “do you have need of me?”

Mr. Poole reached into the same jacket pocket that he’d pulled the injunction from and produced another trifolded document.

“Sign this,” Mr. Poole said. “And we will take you to be briefed.” He turned his body so that Congressman Laurence could see the door behind him. “If not, you’re free to go any time.”

For a moment, they stared at each other. Congressman Laurence rotated back and forth in his chair. He hated how Mr. Poole smiled. It made him feel like no matter which option he chose, the door or the paper, he was giving Mr. Poole exactly what he wanted.

Congressman Laurence rose from his seat and walked toward the door. When he was almost shoulder to shoulder with Mr. Poole, he turned and smiled. Mr. Poole handed him the pen, still managing to seem indifferent as to whether he signed or not.

The paper was sparingly decorated; the presidential seal was at the top, some very important and official sounding paragraphs followed. He was surprised to see that his name was already typed into the document, but he didn’t want to give Mr. Poole the satisfaction of an awe-struck glance. When he finally got to the bottom portion he signed on the dotted line indicating that he agreed to the confidentiality and secrecy of this operation and would, under no circumstances, share them with anyone not of appropriate clearance.

No sooner had he finished signing his name than the paper was pulled from under his fist and seemed to disappear into Mr. Poole’s jacket pocket.

“Welcome aboard,” Mr. Poole said. “Follow me and we will get you up to speed on the operation and what your role is to be.” Congressman Laurence began to follow, but Mr. Poole stopped short. “How do you feel about being an ambassador, Mr. Laurence?”

Congressman Laurence tried his best to smile.

“Ambassador to where?” Congressman Laurence said.

Mr. Poole, gathering his papers off the table, didn’t even look at him as he answered, and his tone was the steepest condescension the congressman had ever heard.

“China, of course,” Mr. Poole said.

Congressman Laurence didn’t much appreciate the tone, but he didn’t have time to say anything before Mr. Poole stepped to the wall and opened it. He walked through, never looking back, and Congressman Laurence had to give a quick hop to catch up.

Every couple meters, the hallway was lit by low, orange lights. The light looked strange against the dense, gray paint that covered the walls because the paint seemed to be drinking in the light; none was reflected so it seemed as if the lights’ sole purpose was to illuminate themselves.

Almost as if he'd read Congressman Laurence's mind, Mr. Poole said, "We aren't trying to look dubious or anything, Congressman, the low lighting is to make sure that it can't be seen shining under the seal of the false wall."

This didn't make Congressman Laurence feel any more at ease, but the fact that Mr. Poole's voice didn't echo made the hall seem less like a crypt.

"Where are we going?" Congressman Laurence asked.

Mr. Poole just looked over his shoulder at Congressman Laurence as he pressed the elevator button as if to imply that the game of twenty questions would have to wait until they had reached their destination.

When the elevator opened, two men in suits were already standing inside. They did not get out, nor did they nod or even seem to acknowledge Congressman Laurence and Mr. Poole. Mr. Poole gave them each a nod, but it seemed somewhat sarcastic.

The elevator ride was quick, but very uncomfortable in its silence. Congressman Laurence had never wished so much for elevator music in his life.

Finally, the doors opened and Congressman Laurence followed Mr. Poole down a hallway almost identical to the one that had led from the meeting room to the elevator. There were no doors in the hall except the one at the end. Mr. Poole placed his thumb in the center of the doorknob; after a couple seconds, there was a click and the door swung open on its own.

"Come in," Mr. Poole said, still not turning around.

Congressman Laurence entered cautiously. When he got in the room, Mr. Poole closed the door behind him.

"Have a seat, Cong —" He stopped and smiled. "Mr. Laurence."

Congressman Laurence looked around the room. It was dark and didn't have any windows. Mr. Poole took a piece of paper and a bright, red pen out of his drawer. The pen seemed to glow in the gloom of the room.

"Mr. Poole," Congressman Laurence said in a very soft tone. "Don't we already have an ambassador to China? I'm almost certain we do. Has something happened?"

"To be sure," Mr. Poole said. "But ambassadors aren't elected and we can replace them as we please."

He smiled in a way that brought the conversation to a close before focusing his attention on the paperwork and the brilliant, red pen. Congressman Laurence looked around the room again. A small book case was behind Mr. Poole's desk. He had some legal books, an almanac, and, on the top shelf, a book of world maps. But on the bottom shelf, he had hard cover copies of Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy, A Tale of Two Cities, and the whole collection of the Game of Thrones series.

"Have you read them?" Mr. Poole said before Congressman Laurence had known he was being watched.

"Just the Dickens," Congressman Laurence said. "I've heard of the other two though. It's quite a strange collection."

Mr. Poole smiled, "Until recently I had plenty of time to read," he said, taking a moment to stare back at the books. "I'm about halfway through the series, the other two are just old favorites."

He seemed to want to say more, but went back to his paperwork. Mr. Poole's readiness to share his personal information came as a surprise to Congressman Laurence.

Mr. Poole finished the paperwork and slid it across the desk with the pen on top.

"Just sign by the X, Congressman, and everyone will call you ambassador from now on."

“And,” Congressman Laurence said when the pen was almost on the paper. “You tell me everything, right?”

“Well,” Mr. Poole said, smiling with that implied wink again. “I’ll tell you almost everything. There are some things we can’t know for sure yet.”

Congressman Laurence considered this for a second, but only a second, before signing. Just as with his agreement in their original meeting room, the signature was barely finished when Mr. Poole pulled the paper from under *Ambassador* Laurence’s hand and put it into his jacket pocket.

Ambassador Laurence smiled victoriously and was about to ask a question when Mr. Poole raised his hand in front of him, demanding silence.

“Now, Congressman,” Mr. Poole said. “I’ll brief you on the situation. Please, hold your questions until the end; I’ll likely get to them along the way.”

Ambassador Laurence inclined his head awkwardly and held his mouth open as if to say something. *It’s Ambassador Laurence.*

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Poole said with a smile. “Ambassador Laurence.”

Mr. Poole waited for Ambassador Laurence to nod before he continued.

“The situation thus far,” Mr. Poole said, getting up from his chair to pace the small area behind his desk. “Is that people are disappearing all over China.” He waited for the nod again. “As of now, due to the sheer scale of these occurrences, we cannot completely rule out the government.” He turned to face Ambassador Laurence squarely. “This is where you come in,” he said. “As an ambassador you will get more access to the operations of the government than our other operatives.” Mr. Poole resumed his pacing. “You are to ascertain whether or not the government is behind these disappearances as well as the reason for the lack of electronic communication.” Mr. Poole stopped his pacing again. “This is your part of the mission.”

“That’s it?” Ambassador Laurence said.

Mr. Poole smiled. “Yes, the other angles are being worked by the rest of the team.” He moved his head to lock eyes with Ambassador Laurence. “You sound disappointed.”

Mr. Poole was right. Where was the snooping and the recon? Where were the fast cars?

“If you know it’s the government —”

“We don’t,” Mr. Poole said. “But we don’t know that it’s not either. We need more information.”

“I thought you had more information,” Ambassador Laurence said. “That’s why I signed the damned papers. I don’t even speak Chinese.”

Mr. Poole looked at Ambassador Laurence like a disappointed kindergarten teacher. “Well, you’ll have a translator, and it’s too late to turn back now, I am sorry to disappoint you though.”

Ambassador Laurence was confused, and the smile on Mr. Poole’s face didn’t leave any room for victory.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve already told you classified information,” Mr. Poole said. “If you go back now I have to detain you until the matter is resolved.”

“How long would that be?” Ambassador Laurence said, not wanting to take his last move off the table.

“It’s a sixteen hour flight from here to China, so at least that long,” Mr. Poole said, but his smile said, *weeks, months, maybe years.*

“All right,” Ambassador Laurence said.

“You can select some people to be your staff,” Mr. Poole said. “We’ll have some of our own people in there also, of course. We will also provide you a security detail.” Mr. Poole opened the door for Ambassador Laurence to leave. “The elevator will be waiting.

Ambassador Laurence nodded and shook Mr. Poole’s hand before leaving. Just like before, the two suited statues were waiting for him in the elevator. When he entered the original meeting room again, the wall closed behind him. He couldn’t help smiling as he left. He knew what he was going to do.

When he passed the front desk, he reclaimed his phone and immediately called Shelly.

“Hello, Shelly,” he said as she tried to tell him about everything that happened. “Shelly, Shelly, I know. Please just call Mr. and Mrs. Bucks and tell them I’m sorry about what happened. I’ll be back in town tomorrow.” He waited for her to confirm before he continued.

“Pack your bags, Shelly, we’re going to China and the Bucks’ are coming with us.”

He hung up the phone before Shelly could ask any questions. He hailed a cab and smiled, thinking of Mr. Poole’s face when he heard that the Bucks’ were coming as part of his staff.

Before he got in he looked straight at the camera by the door of the building, smiled, and waved. He hoped that Mr. Poole was watching.

Lan Guang

Chairman Lan was not used to waiting to be seen, and the ship’s control deck hadn’t made the time go any faster. There was no wallpaper, no pictures, no windows, and, today, there weren’t even other people. Chairman Lan had never wanted outdated reading material so badly.

“The Admiral is ready for you, Mr. Chairman,” Admiral Hosuka’s assistant said.

He smoothed his suit and arranged his sleeves so his cuffs came out past his jacket evenly on both arms. Chairman Lan nodded at the young, low-ranking man who seemed happy enough to have been acknowledged.

Without knocking, Chairman Lan entered and crossed the small room quickly to meet Admiral Hosuka. Instead of the formal bow, the two shared a friendly hand shake.

“You are early, Guang,” Admiral Hosuka said as he walked back to his seat. “I should have had you wait until I finished my work.”

Admiral Hosuka made a sarcastically serious face.

“I’m sorry, Admiral,” Chairman Lan said. “Next time, I’ll make sure to be late.”

Chairman Lan thought about insisting, again, that Hosuka call him Chairman, or at least Sir, but decided that insisting on it for the millionth time would be no more effective than the previous ones. His old friend would always be his old friend and would also always believe himself to be more Chairman-material than Chairman Lan. Whenever the Admiral called him Guang, he almost wished the Committee had given the job to him instead.

To the untrained eye, Admiral Hosuka’s office was nothing special, but anyone who spent much time in other parts of the ship could see that it was lavish. His floor was all treated oak, not something easily done on a naval destroyer, and he had a book case behind him filled with nothing in particular; the Admiral probably hadn’t read any of them, but the leather bindings looked nice. The walls were painted a deep green that went nicely with the floor, and the only thing more impressive than the Admiral’s desk which had an immaculately engraved quote from the play *Henry V*, was the throne of a chair he sat in.

"I'm glad you could see me before we put back out to sea, Guang," Admiral Hosuka said. "I have some important things to tell you."

"Of course, Admiral," Chairman Lan said. "I'll hear your report soon enough, but first I'd like to know how you've been."

Admiral Hosuka's surprise showed in his smile, but it was a delighted sort of surprise.

"I'm doing wonderfully, Guang, how about you?"

Chairman Lan nodded mildly. "I'm doing all right." Chairman Lan broke eye contact and pretended to remove some lint from his uniform. "I wish this General Chun would leave me alone though. I'm running out of reasons to cancel appointments."

Admiral Hosuka seemed to shrink in his seat at the mention of General Chun. He did not look afraid or worried; he looked sad.

"I don't expect he'll let up anytime soon, Guang," Admiral Hosuka said. "His son disappeared during that relocation action in Little River."

Chairman Lan smiled and nodded. It took everything he had not to ask how Hosuka knew. Chairman Lan himself had only found out a day earlier. Not wanting to seem shocked, Chairman Lan changed the subject.

"Well, I suppose I know which command he'll be asking of me then," Chairman Lan said. "I'll answer next time he calls. He can have it for all I care."

Admiral Hosuka nodded, clearly tired of the subject.

"Did you take care of our little problem, Hosuka?" Chairman Lan said.

Admiral Hosuka seemed confused for a second before he reached down into his desk drawer and began fishing around. Hosuka had never been very organized. Chairman Lan resisted the urge to thoroughly inspect the Admiral's uniform. He was sure it was in need of a press and a clean.

"I requisitioned those magnetized changing rooms," he said. "And I sent your son to acquire the necklace." He pulled his hand out of the drawer. "Here it is."

Chairman Lan took the necklace in his hand and rolled the steel beads around in his palm. He could feel them cling to his wedding band. He wondered if Zhao would have stolen from a military inspector's office if he had ordered it instead of Admiral Hosuka.

"Zhao did well," Chairman Lan said. "Have we figured out what this means yet?" Chairman Lan said. "Do we know how this connects to the glass, and the outages, and our communications?"

Admiral Hosuka nodded and let his eyes wander about the room as he spoke. "We have some theories, Guang, but all our men have to go on are effects, symptoms really." Admiral Hosuka looked down at Chairman Lan's shirt cuffs that showed equally from under his jacket sleeves on each arm and smiled. "We need to find some causes, some maladies."

Chairman Lan crossed his arms, hiding his cuffs in the tangle. Around Admiral Hosuka, he had always been self-conscious.

"Yes, I know," Chairman Lan said. "I have my best men working on it continuously." He noticed that Admiral Hosuka was not nearly satisfied and, just as he was about to speak, Chairman Lan continued, "Dr. Kitsuno is in charge, I believe you've heard of him."

"Stealing scientists from your friends," Admiral Hosuka said with a grim expression. "I guess nobody can say you aren't doing all you can." His expression lightened as he continued. "I have my men working on it too, though, now, one less than before. Between the two of us, we ought to find something out."

Admiral Hosuka smiled, but Chairman Lan was nearly to the point of bursting. He was sick of Hosuka overstepping his bounds, taking advantage of their relationship. He should do as he was told and nothing more, but he could never bring himself to rebuke his closest friend, and probably, now, his only true friend. He owed everything to Admiral Hosuka and he planned to keep paying up.

“I’ll have that report now,” Chairman Lan said.

“Finally,” Admiral Hosuka laughed. “I’ve wanted to tell you since you walked in.”

Admiral Hosuka reached into the locked cabinet behind his desk and brought out a disorganized stack of papers: some maps, a couple of reports, and a binder which he set off to the side. He unrolled a map first and Chairman Lan leaned in to take a look.

“These maps show an immense electrical abnormality,” Admiral Hosuka said. “Which some of my men believe to be large enough to affect our electronic communication as it’s been affected.”

Chairman Lan had seen these same maps about a week before, but the disturbance marked on the map was still strikingly strange. It wasn’t part of a storm or hurricane, it remained in a fixed position on all of the maps, and it seemed to be strategically placed equidistant from Japan, China, and the Phillipines. Chairman Lan brought his eyes up from the paper to look at Admiral Hosuka only to see that he was staring aimlessly around the room again.

“What do the others think?” Chairman Lan said.

Admiral Hosuka momentarily met Chairman Lan’s gaze before resuming his optical meandering. Chairman Lan had always noticed that Hosuka had never liked making eye contact with superiors; it made him both happy and sad to see the action directed at him.

“Just nay-sayers,” Admiral Hosuka said with weakly veiled agitation. “They say that it isn’t close enough to be doing anything.” He, again, met Chairman Lan’s gaze, but his face showed visible disquiet. “They say that something would have to be bringing that sort of interference to us – focusing it on us somehow.”

Chairman Lan returned his eyes to the strange map images.

“Do you know what it is yet?” Chairman Lan said. “Have you investigated at all?”

Admiral Hosuka leaned forward putting his elbows on the desk and smiling big. “Why do you think I’m putting out to sea so soon, Guang?”

Chairman Lan should have guessed. Hosuka had always been both a war dog and a glory hound. It would be a solid attempt by Admiral Hosuka to finally get Chairman Lan’s job, but Chairman Lan didn’t know whether to smile or frown.

“I suppose you’ll be commanding this sub yourself then,” Chairman Lan said.

Admiral Hosuka winked. He seemed quite pleased with himself. Chairman Lan frowned, but he knew he could not dissuade his old friend.

“What are those other reports, Admiral?” Chairman Lan said, pointing at the stack of papers still in the original clutter Admiral Hosuka had pulled from his drawer.

Admiral Hosuka looked through them, discarding some and piling others in front of him. Then, he grabbed up all of the maps in a clutter and dropped them back into his drawer.

“These,” Admiral Hosuka said. “Are those beach reports you had me start.” He pulled one out of the pile. “This one provided some insight that I think you’ll be interested in.”

Chairman Lan regarded the report:

Section 118A Special Report

Dr. Ikido Akali
(Date)

We've found that the glass on the beaches is always a very curious sort. It is called lechatelierite. It is curious because this is only caused by lightning strikes or meteor impacts on sand or other silica-rich surfaces. The thing that is most odd is the pathing of the fulgurite within the lechatelierite (this is the actual glass formed whereas the fulgurite represents the flow of the bolt over and within this silica) is completely horizontal. It is as if the lightning was striking parallel to the beach surface rather than against it, like it was crawling in the sand. We have been able to recreate the phenomenon in a laboratory setting, but it takes immense amounts of electricity, and we still are unable to recreate the appearance of an undisturbed surface that is apparent at all these sites. We are still working on a connection between the glass and the magnetism.

"I think I'll take this back for Dr. Kitsuno to have a look at," Chairman Lan said. "And I would also like those magnetic changing rooms delivered to our facility." Chairman Lan pulled out a business card and scribbled something quickly. "Here's the address."

Admiral Hosuka smiled and nodded. "I'll do it as soon as you leave, Guang," he said. "Stay and have a drink with an old friend before he goes off to save the world." Admiral Hosuka turned his back to the Chairman to rummage around in his liquor cabinet.

"I will," Chairman Lan said, smiling at the thought of what he was about to say. "In three days."

Admiral Hosuka stopped abruptly and spun to face Chairman Lan. "We leave tomorrow, that is the schedule I've set and –"

"You leave in four days, Admiral," Chairman Lan said as he watched the Admiral's eyes fight their urge to wander. "I'm sending over some new equipment and an expert to outfit it to your ship. I've discussed it with Secretary Lopo and he agrees that we can't have you nuking half of the Pacific Ocean." Chairman Lan raised his hand as Admiral Hosuka began to protest. "It is an electrical disturbance and we will give you equipment to deal with just that."

Admiral Hosuka nodded. It was all he could do. He got up, the two shook hands and said farewell, and Admiral Hosuka closed the door behind Chairman Lan.

As he walked through the small waiting area and out of the submarine, Chairman Lan couldn't help but feel as though the vessel was overcome with an insurmountable foreboding. The gray walls, the cold, metallic floors, and the circular windows painted with their last days of sunlight. He hoped the equipment would help his old friend make it back, but the more he walked in the ship, the more it seemed to be too much the color of the bottom of the sea.

Chairman Lan looked back at the submarine as his guards were escorting him to his car. He thought about the quote etched on the front of the Admiral's desk and wanted to go and bid him farewell one more time because he knew he would not be back for that farewell drink he'd promised, but he could not.

Instead, he just whispered to the wind, "Once more into the breach, my dear, old friend."

Sonic

According to the messages from the children, the 'tide' would be breaking upon the hill any day now. The tide was of men, not water, and it had been gathering force and seeking a target. Sonic often wondered how the children knew as much as they did. Were they omnipotent?

Clairvoyant? He was unsure, but the children had not yet steered him wrong – at least not to his knowledge.

“The meal is ready,” the bald Warden said from the other side of the invisible barrier.

“I’ll be right down.” Sonic opened his eyes and stared into the infinite reflections mirroring back and forth between the mirror and his mirrored robes. It looked as if he were shrinking inside himself, but with each successive image, getting closer to his core, his truth, his point.

Sonic had thought a lot about the point in the past few days. He watched it for hours at a time, obsessed about it. One day, he had sat, straddling the thin line dividing his holy hill from the rest of the world.

It was like an abandoned, dirt road. Nothing living tread upon it or settled there, only the occasional dead leaf blew through, and even they tended to hurry past. Sonic was the only living thing he had ever seen exist within the thin confines of the point – whether it was for fear, knowledge, or chance he did not know.

It had gotten its name shortly after the ceremony in which the children had sanctified it and given Sonic his robes. They had spoken to Sonic in his radio, saying that it was the point at which the old world ended and the new world began. That made Sonic the first human inhabitant of the new world. He was not sure of his purpose in it.

He tabled his meditations and headed down the hill to dinner. It was a nice arrangement – fish on a bed of rice with some wild berries. Sonic’s old house had a berry bush by the front door. He had never eaten them and now regretted it because he loved the wild berries the Wardens served with every meal. They were perfect, sweet, little miracles of nature. Tastier than candy, good for the body, and good for the soul.

“Thank you,” Sonic said, turning to walk back up the hill. “Sleep well.”

“Wait,” one of them said.

Sonic turned. All eyes were focused on the Warden across the table from Sonic. He was an old man, easily the oldest of the Wardens, but there was an aged strength to him that showed in every movement. Sonic imagined his father would look a lot like this old man, if he were still alive. He had never noticed it before. Maybe the physical similarity wasn’t really that much, but in that moment, with that force and conviction, the old Warden made Sonic feel as though he were speaking to his father. It shook him.

“What have the children said?” the old man said, rising to his full, gigantic height. “When will the wave break?”

The eyes of the Wardens shifted to Sonic.

“Soon, is all I know,” Sonic said. “The children speak in riddles and abstracts. It is hard for me to comprehend their entire message or meaning.”

The old Warden cast his eyes down and nodded.

“I cannot swim,” the old man muttered under his breath.

“Have faith, my friend,” Sonic said in a voice even he no longer totally believed. “The tides are governed by the children. None shall sink.”

The old man looked up. At first, Sonic thought it was sadness in his eyes, but realized it was pity.

“To govern is only to create the illusion of control.” The man stood. “Waves will roll where they roll. The tide has no master but the Moon.”

The other Wardens were silent with eyes on Sonic; Sonic, with his eyes on the old Warden; and the old Warden with his eyes on the Moon. Sonic knew he should say something, squelch this questioning of the children, but he could think of nothing compelling.

He bid the Wardens an awkward good night and returned to his hill. The old Warden's words echoed in his head. *The tide has no master but the Moon. The tide has no master but the Moon! THE TIDE HAS NO MASTER BUT THE MOON!*

The words rattled against the walls of his mind. It was all he could do to get back to his space in front of the mirror, cross his legs, and try to quell the booming echo through meditation.

He struggled for some time to silence the shouting in his head. It was an old part of him, a rebellious part, a part he'd thought died the night he'd walked the glass beach. After a bit, the words were a light whisper – quiet enough to think about.

The tide has no master but the Moon. Was it true? It was true, without a doubt. But what did it mean? He wanted to ignore it – what did an old Warden have to show him that the children could not? *Maybe it was not that they children could not, but that they would not.*

No, the children would not deceive him. He thought about Little River. He thought about all the villagers taken hostage, not given a chance to join. But the children had never said they would give such a chance. It was Sonic who had assumed.

He remembered Mr. Ming, Han's father. He was highly respected in the village. He had not feared the children. He had thanked them, bowed deeply, but the children moved with cold purpose. One of them had reached for a young boy, trying to lead him away from his mother, toward the machines waiting in the river. Mr. Ming had struck its wrist with his walking stick – not in combat, but in warning. He had volunteered to go first. He led by example to calm the others. Such a man should have been allowed to join.

It did not matter. It was over, done with. The children had not deceived him, he had deceived himself. He repeated this over and over again in his head, but he couldn't make himself believe it fully.

The tide has no maser but the Moon. The words continued to plague Sonic's mind, but he couldn't make them fit. He had, in his mind, two truths; each opposing the other. One of them had to be wrong, but he didn't know which he hoped it was, or if he even wanted to know. He fell asleep sitting in front of the mirror.

Sonic woke to a strong, cold gust of wind that brought the songs of the birds. He had no dreams. Nothing in his sleeping mind had been able to reconcile the problem. His back hurt from sitting all night. He rose and stretched.

It was a gray day that somehow held no promise of rain. The wind gusted from every direction. It hadn't been this cold since he'd relinquished his shoes. A part of him wanted them back.

He could not see the Sun so he had no way of knowing how soon the Wardens would call him to breakfast. He sat back down in front of the mirror – infinite and endlessly smaller reflections of Sonic ricocheted back and forth between the mirror and his robes. He thought on the words for a moment, but hit the same wall as he had the night before.

After some time of looking deeper into his reflections, trying to make eye contact with the smaller and smaller visions of himself, Sonic made a change. He rose, removed the robes, laid them gently on his bed roll, and sat back down.

It seemed better. There was no infinity before him, just his own melancholy, yet peaceful, reflection in the mirror. This he could manage. *The tide has no master but the Moon.*

"Breakfast is ready, Master," a voice called from just beyond the point.

Sonic did not answer, and he heard no retreating footsteps. He would not be rushed by the Wardens. When he turned his head, he was met with the smile of the old Warden, the one whose words plagued Sonic's mind. The old man simply nodded as if he understood, gave a final smile, and walked back down the hill.

He decided he could not ignore the call to breakfast. He put his robes back on and descended the hill. The Wardens had already started eating by the time he got there. The younger two looked at Sonic, surprised, then at the old Warden.

"We did not expect you so soon," the bald Warden said. "We were told you would be a while with your meditations and that we should start without you."

He was apologetic and fearful.

The old man's and Sonic's eyes met as they had on the hill, but this time Sonic was the one who nodded and smiled.

"Yes, that is what I said." Sonic took his seat at the table. Only the old Warden was still eating. "The revelation came to me abruptly so I decided to join you."

Sonic smiled, nodded, and encouraged the Wardens to continue eating. They soon calmed down and, again, indulged in their food. The food smelled delicious, but he did not recognize the meat that sat on top of the rice.

"What is this?" Sonic said.

"Doves," said the tall Warden. Sonic looked at him, confused. "I know, it was the strangest thing. I was walking the woods with my bow, and I saw four doves caught in a spider's web." The tall Warden looked down at the dove meat on his plate seeming quite sad. "They were struggling. I don't know how long they were in there, but they all had injured themselves. They weren't going to fly again."

"Do not be sad," Sonic said. "You gave them a good end. As the children say, 'the best death is that which sustains the living.'"

The Wardens to Sonic's left and right nodded, the old one just made eye contact as he put another bite of dove and rice into his mouth.

"So has the Moon told you of the tide?" the old Warden said.

The other two froze, not awkwardly, but cautiously, as two children freeze when they think their parents are about to fight.

"I have no new words," Sonic said, diffusing the tension. "But don't worry; I will inform you as soon as I know."

The old Warden smiled and nodded. The other two breathed sighs of relief.

The meal finished with little conversation. Sonic thanked the Wardens and returned to his hill. As he was leaving, the old Warden set off into the woods again, probably to hunt dinner.

As soon as he got beneath his canopy, Sonic once again removed his robes and sat in front of the mirror. It seemed better this way, simpler. *The tide has no master but the Moon.* Sonic had barely closed his eyes when he heard a loud popping sound echo through the trees. He opened his eyes and inclined his ear toward the sound. He thought he heard a faint shout, then another pop. *Gunshots.*

He ran toward the Warden's camp, but stopped right before the point. He looked down at it, then through the trees, toward the camp, then back down at the point. He did not cross it. He

heard a rumble heading toward him – orders, shouting, screaming, truck wheels, but no more gunshots. He knew the Wardens were gone.

He could hear the noises getting closer. Suddenly, the slim footpath exploded as a large truck flattened some saplings. It was terrible, as if it had eaten them. Young life, snuffed out. Sonic wanted to run, but then he remembered the words from the radio. *The wave will break upon the hill*. The words echoed in Sonic's head. He stood his ground, just inside the point.

He saw a man out front. His uniform was covered in commendations and pins signifying rank. He had the old Warden by the collar with a gun to his head. Sonic could hear the old Warden yelling something.

"Stop," he yelled. "Nobody is here. It's just us."

But it was too late. The man already saw Sonic – saw his amazing robes – he would not turn back. The old Warden continued to protest, but the man walked on with unshakable determination.

He could see the man's face, his eyes, nose, his thin line of a mouth.

"Stop," Sonic yelled. He did not know where the impulse to speak had come from. "Come no further. Who are you?"

The man did not stop right away. He came a bit closer, out of some sort of defiance and spite. This man did not take orders.

"My name is General Chun," he said. "I've come for my son and the rest of the men who went missing at Little River." He thrust the old Warden on to his knees and cocked the pistol. "Where is Captain Chun Kai?"

The old Warden's face was to the ground, but his body was not shaking. Sonic pictured him smiling under there, smiling and nodding, understanding something Sonic could not.

"I do not –"

Pop. In the blink of an eye, the old Warden lay limp on the ground with a thin wisp of smoke rising from the back of his head.

"If you do not know, I need you no more than I needed this man." General Chun took aim at Sonic and began walking forward. "Where are Captain Chun Kai and his detachment that disappeared at Little River?"

Sonic was suddenly aware of the presence of soldiers on all sides. He could feel the eyes from all angles.

"They sleep, with the children," Sonic said.

The General fired and the bullet missed as Sonic knew it would. Clearly confused, General Chun fired several more times. Each missed, and each seemed to make him angrier. When his clip was spent, he looked at his pistol as if to blame it and cast it aside.

"I'll ask you one more time, Walker, where –"

"Sonic," he said. "My name is Sonic and I am the envoy to the children."

General Chun laughed until a satisfactory number of men joined him.

"So you're a very important vagrant then?"

"The children come in the defense of the Earth," Sonic said as if he were reciting for a school grade. "We abuse the planet and threaten the life. They come to show us the way. Kneel or fall."

The laughter stopped. General Chun grabbed a pistol from one of the soldiers and pointed it at Sonic, coming closer again.

"I'll ask you one time, barefoot priest." He came to within five feet of Sonic and leveled the gun at his head. "Where are Captain Chun Kai and the detachment that disappeared at Little River?"

Sonic took a couple steps back and put his hands behind his back.

"I do not know," Sonic said. "But even if I could tell you, you could not wrest them from the children. The weapons of man have no power. The children are a force of nature."

General Chun smiled a smile devoid of joy. It was spiteful and damning with sadness somehow at the core. He pulled the trigger.

Sonic did blink as an impulse to the noise, but tried to open his eyes as quickly as possible. He wanted to see it even though he wasn't sure exactly what 'it' would be.

When his eyes opened, it took him a second to realize what it was. The bullet hung in the air, suspended over the point. It was still spinning. As he watched, it seemed to spin even faster. It kept accelerating until it was spinning so fast it appeared to be standing still. If it weren't for the whirring sounds coming from it, Sonic would have thought it was. The gun hung in the air beside it.

The look on General Chun's face was awe. He stared in wonder, as Sonic did, but as soon as he met Sonic's eyes again, his face hardened and he turned to his men.

"Fire," he yelled, backing away from the point.

Pop, pop, pop – infinite popping sounds and muzzle flashes. It sounded like champagne was being opened all around him. His view of the soldiers became obscured by the bullets hanging and whirring at the invisible barrier. After about a minute, the whirring turned to screeching, and the screeching nearly brought Sonic too his knees. He put his hands over his ears. He could feel the vibration of the bullets.

It seemed as though every bullet added to the collection compounded the terrible sound. He couldn't even hear the popping sounds anymore. Sonic wanted to tear his ears off. He felt like his brain was melting.

Suddenly, the vibration was gone, the noise stopped. Sonic opened his eyes. The bullets had fallen in large piles on the outside of the point and all of the soldiers were on their knees; some still had their hands over their ears. The vehicles had fallen apart. And General Chun looked Sonic straight in the eyes, not caring if he saw the fear and confusion within.

In that moment, Sonic pitied the General. He had brought all his power, all he could manage, to bring his son home, and here, his wave had broken upon the hill. Sonic hadn't thought he would have felt any sadness to see such a prediction come to pass.

General Chun stepped forward, speaking to Sonic, but looking somewhere far off.

"I'll ask you one more time," he said, all the force gone from his voice. "Where are Captain Chun Kai and the detachment that disappeared at Little River?"

Sonic wished he knew. In that instant, he would have told him. He would have put the hope back into this man's heart, even if it was an ill-fated hope.

"I do not know," Sonic said, his voice equally devoid of force. "I am sorry."

The General stood there nodding and staring at the ground for what seemed like a full minute. He began muttering to himself, but it was only as he got louder that Sonic heard what he was saying.

"You do not know? You do not know?" he repeated it, getting louder every time. "You do not know? YOU DO NOT KNOW?"

As he shouted, his face hardened again and his eyes were all anger. He stalked toward Sonic.

“You’re coming with me, Mr. Sonic,” he said. “We’ll see what you’re worth to your precious children.”

Sonic was ready to go with him. If General Chun grabbed him, Sonic would not resist. He wondered where the men had gone too. The children said they were ‘laid to an immortal rest,’ but Sonic didn’t know exactly what that meant.

Sonic was about to take a step toward the General, but as he came directly over the point, he collapsed. It was so sudden. One moment, he was alive, fiery, determined, the next, his eyes rolled back and he fell in a heap, half in and half out of Sonic’s sanctified zone.

Sonic was speechless amidst the shouts and screams of the soldiers. Blood began to pool around the General, running from his eyes, ears, nose, and posterior.

There was a flash, Sonic looked up to see lightning flashing all around him. It jumped from soldier to soldier, not seeking the ground, but Sonic. Five, six, maybe seven bolts converged on him at once. He ducked to shield himself, but nothing happened. He looked up and beheld the most beautiful, awe-inspiring thing he’d ever seen – lightning danced across the invisible dome of his hill. It was as if he was within a lightning storm or one of those spheres with the bolts that find your fingers when you touch it. Sonic wanted to cry, but he didn’t know if it was out of fear or the overpowering beauty of the lightning’s dance across his transparent dome.

In an instant, the lightning seemed to circle the walls in a downward spiral and dissipate into the Earth. When he looked up, all the soldiers lay on the ground, and children moved in from all sides.

They started loading the men onto metallic carts with tank treads. They loaded only the living, the stunned, General Chun was left as he laid.

One of the children approached Sonic and gently took his hand. Sonic followed, without a word, to his canopy and bedroll. Once inside, it gestured for him to lie down, he did. It stared at him silently. It wanted him to sleep. Sonic nodded and closed his eyes, thinking he could not possibly sleep, but it came to him instantly. He dreamt of the tides and the Moon.

When he awoke, the child was standing over him in the same place he remembered it last. He wondered if it had actually stood there the whole time, or if it was just his mind playing tricks on him.

Sonic was suddenly aware that he was not on his bedroll, nor was he outdoors. The light he had initially assumed to be the Sun was a simple fluorescent, and the chill he had initially contributed to the cold ground was actually a metal slab.

“Where am I?” Sonic said

The child smiled, and a monitor flashed on behind it.

You are safe, appeared in white letters on top of a blue background.

That didn’t answer Sonic’s question, but he had the feeling that was as close as he was going to get. He sat up. There were no lights, save for the one directly above him, but the corridor seemed to continued on in each direction until it banked slightly one way or another. It seemed as though the passage went on forever. The walls and ceiling were coated in a shiny metal, the same as the carts that had carried the soldiers away.

“Why am I here?” Sonic said. “The wave broke upon the hill, was it not safe after?”

You have questions, appeared on the screen – a statement, not a question. How could they know of his doubts? Was he that obvious? The monitor beeped. **Ask.**

Sonic wasn't sure what to say. It was true, he had questions, but he didn't know where to start, or if he even wanted to know the answers. The monitor beeped again. **Ask.**

Sonic nodded. He didn't know what question to ask first, so he just picked one.

"What happened to General Chun?" Sonic said. "He was alive one second, then dead. What did the point do to him? Was it painful?"

The child smiled, but Sonic couldn't tell what kind of smile it was.

His brain stopped, and this stopped his heart. He felt nothing. The letters hung on the screen. There was no elaboration, no explanation, just the facts of the matter, as if it were the answer to a math problem.

"How?"

Sonic regretted the question as soon as he'd asked it. He didn't want to know how a life could be ended that way. Pain or no pain, it was a grizzly thing to see, and a horrifying thing to contemplate.

The charged, electromagnetic sphere created by 'the point,' as you call it, counteracts the same elements of the brain. Anything not surrounded by a counteracting force, like those provided by your robes, will die upon contact with such a field.

"Will you kill everyone?" Sonic said, horrified. "Will mankind die?"

The child smiled again, but it was no longer comforting to Sonic. It seemed twisted and perverse, like all of the false babble they'd fed him.

We do not kill, we prefer to preserve. Other fluorescent lights throughout the corridor turned on and he could see the slabs – many slabs – just like his, lining the walls. Men, women, children, the slabs contained all sorts.

"Are they –"

The monitor buzzed. **They sleep the immortal sleep.**

Sonic looked around again. This wasn't at all how he had imagined it. It was cold, metallic, unnatural, everything the children were supposed to hate – everything they'd made him hate.

Sonic was getting angry, he wanted more answers, but this subject was becoming too much for him.

"Why involve us?" Sonic said. "Why deceive my brothers and I if such power is already yours?"

The monitor background flashed red and screeched. The child stepped forward. **We deceived no one. We needed your numbers and the distraction you could offer until we could accrue sufficient power.** The background turned blue again and the child relaxed. **Now that fewer of you are needed, we offer you immortal sleep. A well-earned rest.**

Sonic didn't know if he wanted to rage or cry. He had thought the world would be cleansed for he and his brothers; that the children were sent to help them start mankind anew. He thought his life had some sort of grand purpose.

"Do you have it?" Sonic said. "Do you have the power to overthrow mankind?"

The child seemed surprised either by the question or the way Sonic asked it.

We believe so, flashed on the screen. **The tide of this war is in our favor, and we will not let it turn again.**

Sonic smiled, nearly laughed, and thought of the old Warden.

“The tide has no master but the Moon.”

The child cocked its head to the side. No new words appeared on the monitor. It was speechless, as Sonic had been when he had heard those words the first time, but he understood them now. He took off his robes and sat them on the floor.

“I think I’ll sleep a while,” Sonic said, laying down. “When I wake, I’ll tell the world of my dreams.”

The child moved quickly, attaching nodes and strapping Sonic into the slab. After a clip was put on his tongue, the child slid its fingers over Sonic’s eyes to close them. He kept them closed, focusing on the noises of the machine as they swam within his head. They were light at first, but they got louder until they were all he could hear.

Whirling, clicking, whirling, clicking – silence. All went black, but Sonic was not afraid. He heard a baby cry, and a voiced he’d forgotten he loved so much – his father.

“Give him to me,” he said.

Sonic could not see, but he felt strong hands hold him, giant hands, larger than life. He could hear himself crying. He hoped those hands never let go.

Ellen

Ellen had never flown first class before. It seemed to be one of the many perks of travelling with a congressman – wait – ambassador. He had insisted upon being called Ambassador Laurence. He wasn’t pushy about it, but he corrected her every time she misspoke.

First class was much more spacious than she had ever thought. All the seats were big, luxurious leather, and they were positioned around actual tables. Not to mention, the food was much better and the flight attendants were always around. Ellen felt as if she was in a nice restaurant and kept resisting the urge to change into one of the nicer outfits she’d brought.

When they’d left, she was happy that Ron would be coming on another flight; he’d been pretty unbearable ever since Aryana disappeared, and especially since Ellen had convinced him to go to China with Ambassador Laurence. But now, she found that she missed his company. If he were here, he would play cards or watch a movie with her to pass the time. Shelley had been good company for a while, but she had fallen asleep some hours ago after suggesting that Ellen do the same. She’d tried, but the only way she could sleep on airplanes was if she could rest on Ron’s shoulder.

Ellen jumped as a hand touched her shoulder.

“Hello, Mrs. Bucks,” Ambassador Laurence said as he took the empty seat beside her. “How do you like first class?”

Since boarding, Ellen hadn’t seen much of the ambassador. He’d been rubbing elbows with all of the other first class passengers talking about his new title.

“It’s wonderful, and call me Ellen, please,” Ellen said. “I just wish Ron had been able to leave with us. I can’t imagine taking this long flight by myself.”

Ambassador Laurence gave her the same smile he gave everyone. It was like she just said something really funny, but this wasn’t the place to laugh out loud. Sometimes, she could almost swear he was actually engaged in what she was saying.

“I’m sure he’s doing fine, Ellen,” he said. “I just wanted to make sure you weren’t bored over here all by yourself.” He looked over his shoulder at Shelley. “She likes to sleep whenever

we travel very far. She knows she'll have a busy day when we land." When he turned back, Ellen could see something was wrong. Ambassador Laurence looked like he was thinking about something. He'd looked that way most of the trip. Maybe he just didn't like flying.

"I figured that was the case," Ellen said. She turned to the window as Ambassador Laurence got up to leave, but she decided that she needed someone to talk to for a while. "So, Ambassador, what will we do first when we land?"

Ambassador Laurence gave that same smile as he slid back into the seat. He seemed relieved. Ellen hoped that she wasn't bothering him by asking him to stay. He seemed like he needed distracting as much as she did.

"That's really Shelley's department," he said. "I'm just a pretty face; she's the brains behind the whole operation."

Ellen laughed and the ambassador followed suit.

"I'm sure you're much more than that, Ambassador" she said. "Not everyone would do what you've done for me and Ron." She took his hand in both of hers and met his eyes.

"Resigning, asking the President for the appointment that would allow you to best help us, and taking us with you." She gathered herself and forced a smile before continuing. "When we find Aryana, I'm writing the Vatican to make you a saint."

Ambassador Laurence seemed unable to speak for a moment. She seemed to have caught him off guard, but no sooner had the smile left than it returned and he placed his other hand on top of hers.

"It's my pleasure, Ellen," He seemed completely human at that moment, as if all the politician fell off of him for just that instant and he was everything she thought he was. "I'm tired of sitting, aren't you?"

The question caught Ellen off guard and she barely managed to answer. "I suppose," she said. "But I don't see any alternative."

Ambassador Laurence flashed a smile she'd never seen before. It seemed awkward and lopsided, but completely natural.

"Let's see how far a United States Ambassador can bend the rules, shall we?"

Ellen was surprised at the light in his eyes. He seemed like a boy who just got his first A on a test.

"What are you going to do, Ambassador?" Ellen said.

"Please," Ambassador Laurence said while looking around the cabin. "Call me Leonard." He motioned for a flight attendant to come over. "Excuse me," he said. "My name is Ambassador Leonard Laurence, and this is my advisor, Ellen." The woman shook both their hands. "Would it be possible for us to see the cockpit?"

The woman smiled in a way that let them both know it wouldn't be a problem. "Just let me ask the captain," she said.

Ambassador Laurence turned his new smile back on Ellen. "Being a congressman never quite got me in the cockpit," he said. "At least not while the plane was flying anyway."

Ellen could only think about Ron. He had asked to see the cockpit during their honeymoon flight. He had asked because she was uncomfortable asking herself. They had been denied, and Ellen had always thought that he'd wanted to see one ever since.

"I hope they'll let me take a picture," Ellen said. "Ron would want to see it too."

Leonard had just started speaking when the flight attendant rushed back and gently touched his shoulder. "The captain said it's fine," she said. "Follow me."

Leonard stood and motioned for Ellen to go ahead of him. They walked through a couple curtain dividers and one door that required a swipe card. When they got to the cockpit door, the flight attendant knocked and, after verifying that it was her, the pilot opened the door remotely from the other side.

Both men stood up to shake Ambassador Laurence's hand.

"Thank you for letting us come in," he said. "I've always wanted to look out the front while the plane is flying."

"It's our pleasure," the older man said. He appeared to be the captain. "We were wondering if we could trouble you for a picture though, Mr. Ambassador."

Ambassador Laurence beamed his professional smile again. "Of course," he said. "As long as I get to fly the plane after." He laughed and waved his hand indicating that he was kidding.

"I would let you, sir," the captain said. "But we're going to land soon. You're free to strap in right here and watch us land though."

Leonard looked over at Ellen and motioned for her to get into the picture. "We'll send Ron a picture of that and see what he thinks."

Ellen was smiling so big she was sure her eyes were closed in the picture.

After a couple pictures were taken from everyone's cameras, and after the flight attendant got her own camera for a picture with Ambassador Laurence, the pilots got Ellen and the ambassador situated and strapped into the seats before reclaiming their seats and their controls.

"We'll put the controller on speaker," the captain said. "That way next time we can just let you two land it."

The captain looked back and winked. Ambassador Laurence just gave a thumbs up and Ellen did the same. Ellen leaned forward so she could see out the front. Everything went by so fast. It seemed like the shoreline was just barely coming into view before they were suddenly almost over top of it.

"Air traffic control," said the captain. "Copy air traffic control, this is flight SW 167 requesting clearance to land."

Ellen waited to hear the controller's orders, but they never came.

"Air traffic control," said the captain again. "Copy air traffic control, this is flight SW 167 requesting clearance to land." The pilot turned to Ambassador Laurence. "Sorry, sir," he said. "Sometimes they don't come through on the speaker, we're going to have to put the headsets back on."

Ambassador Laurence just smiled his professional smile again. "Don't worry about it, captain," he said. "You've been more than kind. It's better we land in silence then crash this thing. I'd be the shortest serving ambassador in history."

The pilot forced a smile and plugged in his head phone jack as he turned around.

"Air traffic control," he said with renewed hope. "Copy air traffic control, this is flight SW 167 requesting clearance to land."

Ellen could see the captain's face tighten. The copilot was leaning forward in his seat, trying to get a look at the ground. He recoiled quickly and leaned over to whisper to the captain.

Ellen couldn't hear much of what he was saying, but she was sure she heard the word, "fires."

The captain leaned forward, but he did not recoil. He just stared for a few seconds. His face seemed indifferent, but his eyes had an inhuman focus.

“Air traffic control,” the pilot’s voice was anxious. “Copy air traffic control, this is flight SW 167 requesting clearance to land.”

When a response didn’t come in the next couple seconds, the captain took off his headset and placed it on the dash, but he looked more like he wanted to tear it off and throw it.

“We have to land,” he said to the copilot. “Grab your wheel and lower the gears.”

The copilot looked at him for a second before hitting the microphone button.

“Air traffic control,” the copilot yelled. “Please, copy air traffic control. This is flight SW 167 requesting clearance to land. We need to land now.”

No sooner had he let go of the microphone button than a sound came from the speakers like the one Ellen’s computer made when she logged in.

“Hello,” said an automated voice in clear English. “Please land on the lighted runway running northeast and pull to your appropriate gate.”

After the sound signaled the end of the automated controller, the pilot seemed to seethe with both anger and relief.

“Damned Chinese,” he said. “Two billion people and they’re automating service jobs.”

When Ellen glanced over at the copilot she was even less at ease. He still seemed to be staring out the window at what he had seen before. She wished she could unbuckle and see if it really was a fire.

Ambassador Laurence was focused intently on the back of the pilot’s head. Ellen leaned back and gripped the bottom of her seat as the plane entered its final descent. She could hear the squeal of the front landing gear when it finally hit the pavement. It was so loud that she could have sworn it was in the cockpit.

As the plane slowed and began maneuvering around to find the gate, Ellen looked through the windows all around the cockpit. A couple other planes were moving around, docking at gates, and unloading their passengers, but there were very few, and she couldn’t see or hear any planes taking off.

“Is it some kind of holiday or something?” the pilot said as he looked back at Ambassador Laurence.

“It’s possible,” Ambassador Laurence said. “But I think my assistant would have told me.”

The pilot got the same troubled look he had when the control tower hadn’t responded. “I don’t like it,” he said. “We saw some fires around the city on the descent.” He looked back at Ambassador Laurence again. “Could be riots or something.” His eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t know anything about that would you?”

Ambassador Laurence started to give his professional smile, but seemed to reconsider halfway into it. “I don’t know what’s going on,” he said. “Just get us docked and disembarked and if there’s anything to know I’ll find out.”

The pilot nodded and went back to steering the plane toward the far gate marked by a Chinese character that Ellen understood just as little as any other.

Once the gate was open, the pilot turned to them. “You two go ahead. We’ll send one of the flight attendants and your assistant with your luggage.”

Ambassador Laurence thanked the men again for allowing them in the cockpit and promised to find out what he could and meet them at baggage claim.

Ellen and Ambassador Laurence were the first two off the plane besides the flight attendant who’d opened the doors. When they got into the terminal, it was basically a ghost

town. Every now and then someone came sprinting by, sometimes a family. They all seemed to be running the same way.

"Look at the tickers," Ambassador Laurence said. "There's no numbers, and all of the symbols keep repeating."

Ellen stared at the ticker as if the longer she stared, the better she would understand Chinese. She was still staring right alongside Ambassador Laurence when Shelley and the flight attendant showed up with their bags.

"Can you read that, Shelley?" Ambassador Laurence said. "Or make out any of the characters. Let's put those Rosetta Stone tapes to the test." He tried to give a calm, reassuring smile, but failed miserably.

Shelley stared at them until they repeated a couple times. "All I can make out is that it's telling us to go somewhere. It seems pretty official."

Ambassador Laurence seemed to brush off the partial translation. "We'll find out at the hotel," he said. "Let's get the bags. Shelley, call the embassy and make sure the car is already here." He started to walk away, but stopped as if he remembered something. "And if they try to tell you anything else tell them they can tell me themselves in my hotel room."

"Yes, sir," Shelley said as she handed her bag to one of the flight attendants and dialed her phone. Ellen helped her with the other bag.

By the time they met the pilot and copilot at baggage claim, explained that they didn't know anything yet, and made their way out to the pickup area, the driver was waiting. He looked extremely anxious and didn't even get out of the car to help us pack up until Ambassador Laurence tapped on his window and showed his I.D. The driver seemed rushed, and Ellen was pretty sure he wrinkled or crushed most of her luggage as he crammed it into the trunk of the limo.

Ellen sat between Shelley and Ambassador Laurence. He had offered to give everyone a ride to his hotel so they could call cabs, but they had all declined except the copilot because they had cars waiting to be picked up from rental services.

The copilot just kept looking down at his laced fingers. He seemed to be thinking about something, and whatever it was seemed to scare him. Ellen went to sit beside him.

"What did you see?" she said.

He snapped out of his musings, but he seemed to have missed what she said.

"When you looked out the window before we landed," she said, "what did you see?"

"Lines," he said. "Lines of people like I've never seen. Lines miles long, some of them went further than I could see."

Ellen didn't understand what this could be. Was it a holiday? Some kind of parade?

"And almost no cars," he said. "The only things running were the trains. The Beijing streets were basically empty." He dragged his eyes back down to his laced fingers. "And there were fires," he said. "Lots of fires, all over the place."

Ellen tried to talk some more, but the copilot seemed to be content to just stare at his hands, so she went back over to her spot in between Ambassador Laurence and Shelley.

"What did our friend have to say?" Ambassador Laurence said. "Is he all right?"

Just as Ellen was about to tell him what the copilot said, the limo turned down a street and they could all see for themselves. Both sidewalks were crammed with people all facing the same way. All of the street lights were red, but their driver ignored them and just honked for people to move. Every now and then they saw a flaming car or a pile of flaming trash.

On one of the corners they passed a man in robes holding a sign that seemed to be written in different languages. Ellen was glad English was one of them. The sign said, “The children have come. Go to them and be free forever. Follow the signs.”

Ellen didn’t know who the children were or why this robed man was smiling so big when the whole world seemed to be going crazy, but she had a feeling that she had picked the wrong time to come to China. She wished Ron was with her.

Part II

Prologue

Every morning, Admiral Hosuka made his rounds of the entire ship every evening before going to bed. He changed vessels. He wanted the crew of each to know that he was never far and that slothfulness would not be tolerated. He liked the way the men made themselves busy when he was around. He considered it a testament to his abilities as a leader. Tonight he found himself aboard the commanding destroyer, Fu Zhao; it had his favorite office though he preferred the bed on the sub.

He had been thinking a lot about his meeting with Guang, and even more about the new equipment that the ship had been outfitted with. Guang had also assigned a special technician, an American named Dr. Bryce, to oversee the maintenance and use of the equipment. He was some sort of big-shot genius who, according to the file, had basically invented the equipment, but he was also brash and rude. He amused himself by cheating the crew at cards, though nobody had found out exactly how. Other than that, he seemed content to read in his own little room that adjoined the control center for the new equipment. For the most part, Dr. Bryce seemed put out by having to be aboard the vessel at all.

Not only was Dr. Bryce vague about the new equipment, but he was also the only man who didn't make himself busy when the Admiral was about. This made Admiral Hosuka feel as though Bryce was above his authority and, as a consequence, the Admiral didn't like him.

It was time the Admiral showed Dr. Bryce exactly who was in command. He sought him out in his office which adjoined the control room for the new equipment. Dr. Bryce had designed the control room to be completely shut off from the rest of the ship's power grid. Its walls were even lined with alternating layers of magnetic strips and rubber. Radios didn't work in it, basically nothing electric did that wasn't designed to be in there.

As he entered, Admiral Hosuka got the strange feeling that he didn't belong, as if this part of the ship wasn't his domain anymore. Dr. Bryce had his nose in a magazine, but Admiral Hosuka could tell that he had heard him enter. He didn't know how to begin, but he felt as though he'd been standing silent for an inordinate amount of time.

"Can I help you, Admiral?" Dr. Bryce said in his normal, condescending tone.

Admiral Hosuka stepped into the center of the room.

"You can," Admiral Hosuka said. "I was looking through my reports and noticed that I haven't gotten a single status report from you in the four days we've been gone."

Dr. Bryce smiled.

"It's all in the report that Chairman Lan had sent over," Dr. Bryce said. "My equipment is inactive until we get closer to the site. I shut it down completely when we were ordered to sweep around the northern tip of Japan."

Admiral Hosuka was momentarily retaken by his confusion over that order. It was the last directive the ship had received before all radio contact with mainland control was lost. It was very odd, but it was an official order. Admiral Hosuka realized he was standing silent again and took another step toward Dr. Bryce. He refused to retreat from this man.

"I would still like a report that says as much," Admiral Hosuka said. "And I've been reading the dossier on the new equipment and I can't say that I understand what it's for."

Dr. Bryce closed his magazine and placed it gently on the desk. It lined up flush with the corner. That was why Guang had picked this man; another orderly bureaucrat playing soldier on a ship.

"It's all boring, complicated engineering stuff," Dr. Bryce said. "Basically this is equipment built to deal with what our governments have jointly agreed is the best way to handle this disturbance." Dr. Bryce turned to continue his reading as if the conversation were over. "Given what we know, anyway."

"Maybe you could give me a better understanding then," Admiral Hosuka said. "I want to understand the things on my own vessels."

Dr. Bryce gave another insolent smile. "I have no doubt," he said. He opened his magazine again, hiding his face from Admiral Hosuka.

Admiral Hosuka wanted to throttle him, to grab him and beat him against the walls and push him out into the open sea to swim for his secret little machine. And Guang too, tolerating this arrogant civilian.

"What are you reading?" Admiral Hosuka said with a big smile. He grabbed the magazine, glanced at it, and rolled it up under his arm. "Interesting stuff. Now, as you were saying about this machine?"

Dr. Bryce did not appear to be amused.

"I'm sorry to inform you, Admiral," Dr. Bryce said, "but you do not have the clearance to know what the machine is for." He grabbed another magazine from the desk drawer and sat back down. "Let alone how it works."

Admiral Hosuka could not believe what he was hearing. Didn't have the security clearance?

"It is impossible that I do not have clearance," Admiral Hosuka said with all of the sternness and confidence he could manage. "My clearance is of the highest rank."

Dr. Bryce looked confused, but Admiral Hosuka could hear the sarcasm in his voice when he said, "Oh, I must have been misinformed." Dr. Bryce put his hand on his chin as if he were engaged in pondering a real dilemma. "I didn't know you had classified clearance to United States Government files." Dr. Bryce crossed his arms and smiled. "Egg on my face I guess."

Admiral Hosuka was near bursting. He could tell any man on this ship to shoot Dr. Bryce and dump him out the missile bay and it would be done, but Admiral Hosuka had no way of knowing if this damned machine would come in handy or not.

"I see," Admiral Hosuka said with all the composure he could muster.

"Good." Dr. Bryce reached his hand out as if to shake, but when Admiral Hosuka did the same, Dr. Bryce's hand continued and grabbed the magazine Admiral Hosuka had been holding under his arm. He then sat and proceeded to read as if Admiral Hosuka had already left.

Admiral Hosuka stomped back to his office. Every soldier he passed on the way seemed busier than any man had a right to be – this made him feel a little better. When he returned a hero, he decided that he'd have Guang's job after all and strip this mouthy Dr. Bryce of his clearance and send him home with a couple cane marks on his back – a little schooling in Chinese manners.

For the next couple days Admiral Hosuka avoided Dr. Bryce, though he figured that he was being avoided also. Dr. Bryce basically kept to his room and Admiral Hosuka found things to do on the other vessels to pass the time. He spent most of his time on the nuclear submarine. It was so new and secret that it had no official name, but one of the artillery men had started calling it the Leviathan and the name had stuck.

When Admira Hosuka finally ventured back to the ship, the fleet was closing in on the site. He decided that Dr. Bryce couldn't stop him from being present if the equipment had to be used. But Admiral Hosuka was disturbed from the moment he set foot on the ship's deck in the morning.

There was an unusual amount of laughing, and some of the men didn't busy themselves as they had before. He didn't like it, and he knew it was Dr. Bryce's doing; too much playing cards and not enough writing reports and marking maps.

He grabbed one of the men who appeared to be working the least. He grabbed him hard by the collar and stared him straight in the eyes.

"Bring me Lan Xhou," Admiral Hosuka said. "You have five minutes or you'll be joining him with the sticks."

It was a disciplinary tool of Admiral Hosuka's own invention; cleaning the mess hall after a meal with only a pair of chop sticks. The sailor was well on his way before anyone else in the room had so much as moved. Mentioning the sticks was always more than enough to get speedy compliance.

"Find something to do or I'll find something for you," Admiral Hosuka shouted to the rest of the sailors standing stunned.

Admiral Hosuka almost smiled at how quickly the crew got busy. Everything seemed to be back as it should be. Pleased with himself, he strode to his office to await his first mate. Hardly five minutes passed before Lan Xhou calmly entered the room; though it was clear he'd been making some haste because his breathing was visible and his brow slightly sweaty.

"Sir," Lieutenant Lan said as he gave a stiff bow then stood at attention. "I thought you would be on the carrier today. The message must have —"

"The message was correct," Admiral Hosuka said. "I changed my mind earlier this morning." He walked toward Lieutenant Lan. "It would seem there was a breakdown in communication." He stopped very close to Lieutenant Lan and stared at him coolly, waiting for a blink. "Or possibly a break in the chain of command. What would your father say if he'd come aboard this morning instead of me — if he were in charge instead of me?"

Lieutenant Lan smiled, sensing his chance to say the right thing. "He would have said my uniform was dirty and my shirt needed pressing." Admiral Hosuka could see the boy watching him, waiting for the right moment to smile and say how his father was an inferior commander but a better bureaucrat. "He would have shaken everyone's hands, Sir." Admiral Hosuka relaxed his stern expression and Lieutenant Lan seized the opportunity. "He would not have even noticed the change in the men, as I'm sure you have, Sir."

Admiral Hosuka resisted the urge to smile. He was happy to see that less had changed than he'd thought.

"Lieutenant, I'll not have this talk of your father. He is a fine man and was an admirable soldier." Admiral Hosuka motioned to the chair in front of his desk. Once he was seated, the two men smiled at each other.

Lieutenant Lan seemed hesitant. It was clear he wanted to say something but feared undoing all of the smoothing he'd just finished.

"So, this change in the men," Admiral Hosuka said, "when did it start and what happened to cause it?"

Admiral Hosuka could see that the boy was choosing his words wisely.

"It's not so much a what, Sir," he said. "But a who, and I believe you know who it is."

Admiral Hosuka was not surprised. He had suspected it from the start. One cocky man on the ship who wasn't his direct subordinate and the whole crew seemed to follow his poor example.

"What is he doing?" Admiral Hosuka said. "Does he draw them from work? Give them conflicting orders?"

Lieutenant Lan was noticeably uncomfortable. His arms hugged his sides, and he cast his eyes downward, apparently studying the quote inscribed on the desk.

"It's not so much that he's doing anything," Lieutenant Lan said. "But he is saying an awful lot." The boy fixed his posture and met the Admiral's eyes. "He talks a lot about the mission, especially during card games, and he talks a little about you."

The way Lieutenant Lan trailed off, Admiral Hosuka could tell he'd left something unsaid.

"Out with it, Xhou," Admiral Hosuka said.

Lieutenant Lan was silent for what seemed like a great while, but eventually he said what he had to say, though it sounded more like a question.

"He says that you haven't been around because he told you off the last time you were onboard," Lieutenant Lan cast his eyes down again. "He says we're not coming back from this mission – at least not most of us."

Admiral Hosuka struggled so hard to maintain his composure that he felt his eyes might burst from the strain. Dr. Bryce had overstepped his bounds. His security clearance be damned, he was not in charge of this fleet and most certainly not this ship. If he set so much as one foot outside of his little bubble of immunity, he would be detained and disciplined in front of the crew.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he said more coolly than he'd intended.

Lieutenant Lan bowed and walked briskly from the room.

Before confronting Dr. Bryce, he went about the ship, putting the fear of God back into the crew. One man from each shift from and each section was selected for the sticks, and by the time he was done he had the mess hall scheduled for some very thorough cleaning for the duration of the trip.

By the time Admiral Hosuka decided to see Dr. Bryce, it was late in the afternoon and the sun was making the sky a brilliant mix of orange, pink, and purple. On his way below deck, Admiral Hosuka felt as if everything was in disarray. Men moved by him quickly and without acknowledgement, they seemed busy, but not about any business he'd assigned them. As he descended to the level of Dr. Bryce's quarters, he saw Dr. Bryce moving more busily than he'd thought previously possible for the man. He was checking read-outs and gauges, constantly writing in his notebook. He nearly jumped when he turned and saw Admiral Hosuka behind him.

"Admiral, I didn't expect to see you down here," he said as he hurried off to the far wall of his secret machine. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Admiral Hosuka liked seeing Dr. Bryce this way. It was as if he'd finally come around.

"Yes, doctor," Admiral Hosuka said. "I was hoping to speak to you about –"

"Speaking." Dr. Bryce almost laughed. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to say no to any speaking at the moment. Now is the time for doing."

He hadn't prepared for a response like that. He had expected laziness, arrogance, maybe even some outright disobedience, but not work.

"May I ask what exactly you're –"

“We’ve been over this,” Dr. Bryce said in his familiar, irritated tone. “You don’t have the clearance.” Dr. Bryce stared Admiral Hosuka straight in the eyes. For the moment at least, Dr. Bryce seemed frantic but controlled. “I suggest you wake your men and get them ready to be boarded,” He broke eye contact with Admiral Hosuka. “For all the good it will do anyway.” Dr. Bryce stood for a moment, looking deeply sad, but the mix of fear and purpose soon returned to his eyes. “This machine is going to be tested tonight, Admiral. It will help but it won’t win alone. I’ve already told a couple of the men, but the rest need to hear it from you.”

Admiral Hosuka didn’t know whether to laugh or scream, whether to scramble his men or finally shake Dr. Bryce against the wall. Admiral Hosuka started to speak, but Dr. Bryce cut him off.

“Just do it, Admiral” Dr. Bryce said in a tone of complete exasperation. “If I’m wrong you can have me court marshaled or tortured or whatever you do over here.”

For a second, Admiral Hosuka stood stunned. Boarded? Tested? He wanted to ask what was going on. How this was possible?

“I’ll send word to the Leviathan to –”

“You won’t reach them,” Dr. Bryce said. “Radios have been down for five minutes.” Dr. Bryce looked around at the machine and then back at Admiral Hosuka; he seemed confused. “It happened so fast, we didn’t think it could, but it all fell so fast. The machine didn’t pick them up soon enough, but we know they’re here now and they have to take the ship. The Leviathan is lost, but they still have to take the ship.” He rushed away to another segment of the machine out of Admiral Hosuka’s sight, saying, “They can’t take the ship, they can’t take the ship.”

Admiral Hosuka rushed up the steps and told every man along the way to prepare to be boarded and to spread the word. He clicked the button on his radio to send word up to the loud speaker, but all he got was static so he headed that way as quickly as he could.

On the control deck, he found Lieutenant Lan busying himself with the controllers who had apparently just lost all visuals on radar and sonar and weren’t picking up any radio.

“Come here, Lieutenant,” Admiral Hosuka said. “Go down to the main deck and get control of the men. They’re going to need to be put into ranks and organized.” The boy was confused. He’d graduated top of his class and his father was well connected, but he’d never seen real battle, none of them had, that’s why he needed Xhou down there, standing orders or no. These men were green. “Prepare to be boarded,” Admiral Hosuka said as he put both hands on the boy’s shoulders.

For a second, Lieutenant Lan seemed to freeze but Admiral Hosuka watched his training take over. The boy calmed himself and when the transformation was over, it was a soldier who nodded at him and exited the control deck to go command the lines of the coming battle.

A few moments later the radar and sonar came back on. There was nothing on them, just the two other ships on each side. For a moment Admiral Hosuka thought Dr. Bryce could have been wrong; maybe nothing had happened. He had a daydream of Dr. Bryce being court marshaled. Then he looked closer. The Leviathan was gone.

As Admiral Hosuka was turning from the monitors to make his way down to the main deck with the men, Dr. Bryce burst into the room. He was breathing hard and sweating. His whole body seemed to be shaking. He put his hands on his knees as he began talking.

“This is wrong,” Dr. Bryce said. “Everything came back on – it doesn’t make sense. It shouldn’t have come back on.”

He looked at the monitors in deep confusion, but it didn’t take him long to see the same thing Admiral Hosuka had seen.

"The Leviathan isn't there," Dr. Bryce said. "They came and they're still here. The machine says they're still here." Dr. Bryce rushed to the window to look out on the men assembled on the main deck. He looked to the horizon, to the left and right. He seemed so frightened, as if nothing was going to plan, as if his secret machine would not be enough. Admiral Hosuka could see the wheels in his head turning; he was puzzling it all out. After a couple seconds, his brow raised and he took one last look at the radar screen. "I need to get back," he said as he sprinted from the room. "Goodbye, Admiral."

Who, was all that kept running through Admiral Hosuka's head. *Who? Who? Who?* He couldn't think of any country that would attack them in these waters. He couldn't think of anyone that would dare attack them at all.

Admiral Hosuka saw some men standing, some running to get in formation, and others dragging their feet as if they thought this was all a test. He grabbed the loud speaker controls. "Get ready, men, the enemy is at hand," he said. "Form up, now," The men got back into their tight ranks and readied their weapons.

"Sir." The man in front of the radar screen looked confused. Admiral Hosuka could not think of his name. "The rest of the fleet, Sir. Look."

After a couple sweeps of the radar screen, Admiral Hosuka could see what had confused the man. The two subordinate destroyers directly to the right and left of the formation were slowing, and the two carriers on the exterior were speeding up.

"Get them on the radio, now," Admiral Hosuka said.

One of the officers in the booth input the right frequency into the radio and handed the speaker to Admiral Hosuka.

"Breach, control, do you copy," he said. "Maintain formation."

When he let the button go, all he heard was a jumble of static. He waited several seconds before trying again.

"Breach, control, do you copy? Maintain formation, now."

He let the button go. Again, he was surrounded by the sound of static.

"Change it to Dagger's frequency, Breach's radios must still be down."

The officer input the new frequency and gave Admiral Hosuka the signal that it was ready, but as soon as he pressed the speaker button the control booth rang with static. It was strange static; it seemed to have a rhythm, it seemed to screech and wail, and it was so loud that the officer pulled all of the cords from the back of the transmitter.

Suddenly, the radar technician shouted, "Stop. Stop the ship. All reverse."

"Hold," Admiral Hosuka said. "I give the orders, what's going on sailor?"

The man didn't point at the screen but at the windows. Admiral Hosuka saw Breach and Dagger coming from two edges of the horizon. They were circling in front, cutting the ship off. When he looked down at the radar, he could see that the two ships that had slowed were closing in behind them. They were going to be boxed in.

"Get me those ships on the radio, now" Admiral Hosuka said. "Plug that back in and fix the static, and get someone out on the deck with a spotlight. If the radio doesn't work, we'll use code."

When the officer got the radio hooked up again he tried everything to alleviate the static. The pitch changed once and it seemed that he was close, but there was no further progress so the radio was unhooked again.

Upon reaching the main deck, two officers with landing wands had started flashing morse code, telling the ships to retake their positions in the formations. After a few moments, Breach,

Dagger, and the rear destroyers had closed the ship into a tight circle. The fleet sat backdropped by a beautiful, purple, orange, and pink dusk radiating from the western horizon.

The main decks of Breach and Dagger seemed to be packed with men, but the sun behind them made them all shadows. The ship made them seem small. The ship gave a shudder and the lights went out. The shadows on the far off decks all fell in unison. It was so strange.

“What was that?” Said the officer by the radar screen.

Admiral Hosuka did not answer. Everything seemed odd. The air felt odd, like it pulled at him, at parts of him. Moments after the distant shadows had fallen, some of them began to rise. By the time he saw the guns on the rear destroyers moving, Admiral Hosuka knew what must happen.

He grabbed the loud speaker microphone and shouted, “Load the big guns, get to your stations. Take aim at the rear destroyers!” He turned to the officer with the disconnected radio tuner. “Bring Dr. Bryce up here, now.”

The man was out of the room before the last words had time to ring off the control room walls. Admiral Hosuka grabbed the loud speaker microphone again and began to give another order, but no sound came from the main deck, nor did he hear it echo through the ship. He looked at the radar and sonar screens and saw only black.

He heard one of the officers in the back shout, and when he looked up he saw a jet flying through the air end over end as if it’d been thrown. It crashed just short of the ship but splashed water all the way up to the main deck. He could see more jets rise from the decks of Dagger. Until they got close, they looked like flailing birds in the distance.

Admiral Hosuka could hear screams all around him. Some men were scattering for life boats while others manned their guns, loading and firing as if jets were not being launched at them. He was proud of those men, and he forgave the ones in the boats.

“Man a gun or get to the lifeboats,” Admiral Hosuka said to everyone and no one all at once.

He followed the men out of the control room. Most went left to the barracks and life boats; a few went right to the armory. Admiral Hosuka went to neither place. He made his way out to the chaos of the main deck to find his first mate.

On the way, the man he’d sent to get Dr. Bryce rushed up gasping.

“Dr. Bryce’s quarters,” he said in between gasps. “The machine, all closed off.” The man stood upright as his breath returned to him. “The computer says it’s pressure locked, it can’t be opened.”

Admiral Hosuka was surprised, but didn’t really care what had become of Dr. Bryce anymore, the situation had gone beyond his little machine.

“Thank you,” Admiral Hosuka said with a bow. “Get to the life boats or man a gun.”

He didn’t wait to see which way the sailor went before continuing along to the main deck.

Lan Xhou was in the center of the chaos, trying to direct men to guns or get snipers into their nests. Admiral Hosuka could see that he was having little success.

The unintelligible jumble of shouting along with the whistling of shells and jets screaming through the air was deafening, but every man that saw him seemed to follow.

“To your posts,” he shouted. “We either take our ships back or sink them.”

The men scattered to their posts, though he knew that some would find their way to the life boats. He turned to Lieutenant Lan.

“We ignore Breach and Dagger,” Admiral Hosuka said. “They’ll run out of jets to throw at us eventually.”

“How are they even –”

“It doesn’t matter,” Admiral Hosuka said. “Find two rifles and meet me in the control booth. I’ll smash out some windows.”

By the time he’d emptied his clip into two of the bullet proof windows in the control room and used the fire axe on the wall to finish them off, Lieutenant Lan was back with the rifles and plenty of ammo.

“I’m not a sniper, Sir,” he said.

“That’s okay, Xhou,” Admiral Hosuka said, adjusting his scope. “It’s getting dark so just shoot whatever you can see moving.” He squeezed off a round and watched one of the dark shapes fall. “Just keep shooting, you’ll get the hang of it.”

For a half hour or more, they sat without speaking. There was enough noise and chaos around to occupy their ears, and Admiral Hosuka enjoyed hearing all of the little noises of the rifle. Click, pop, boom. Click, pop, boom. Almost every time he heard that noise he knew one of the bastards that had taken his ships was dead. The shadowy men didn’t move much, it was like target practice – like they didn’t care.

When Admiral Hosuka went to reload and found the boxes empty, he got out of his prone position and just sat back and waited for Lieutenant Lan to finish his clip. He closed his eyes and listened to the chaos, the screaming, to the noise of shells being fired, and the silence of the guns left unmanned.

“Lieutenant,” Admiral Hosuka motioned for the young man to come closer. “Find a life boat, one with a motor and beacon.”

The boy started to protest, but Admiral Hosuka held up his hand for silence.

“Make it out of this ring and head for Japanese waters. Make it back to China, Xhou, your father must know what happened.”

Lieutenant Lan was quiet for some time. They were both quiet, but the chaos broke in when the ship shifted and lurched beneath their feet. Lieutenant Lan lost his footing and fell forward, but the Admiral caught him. When the ship stabilized, he let go; he could feel the boy hold on slightly for just a fraction of a second, but it was enough to make him smile. There were shouts about a jet breaching the hull and fires needing to be put out.

“Who did this, Sir?” Lieutenant Lan said.

Admiral Hosuka wished he could answer the question – if not for Xhou, then for himself.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Xhou glanced over Admiral Hosuka’s shoulder and stared for a couple seconds.

“Whoever it is, they’ve been sending that same message since the ship shook and they all fell down,” Lieutenant Lan said. “They just keep saying, ‘sink or swim.’”

Admiral Hosuka thought about it for a couple seconds before smiling at Lieutenant Lan.

“Find the life boat, Xhou,” he said, bowing as one does before an officer. “And tell your father I’ll have his job when I’m back.”

The two smiled brief, weak smiles and Lieutenant Lan bowed and saluted before running to follow his orders.

After Lieutenant Lan was out of sight, Admiral Hosuka hurried to find the nearest megaphone and began screaming abandon ship as loud as he could. He walked the main deck what seemed like twenty times over ordering an abandon ship until his throat was sore, his voice hoarse.

Men jumped from the main deck and from their bunk windows. The water around the ship was white with thrashing swimmers. Some swam for the other ships, others tried to get into fleeing life boats.

He stood alone on the bow listening to the hull creak and fill with water where the jet had punctured it. The ship shook beneath him. Suddenly, the hull gave and the ship rocked hard to the left. Admiral Hosuka caught himself on the rail and stared down at his men in the water.

There was a sound like thunder as the hull gave way, and he thought he saw lightning branch through the water. He felt like falling and closed his eyes, and realized that, in the dark world behind his eyelids, he did not hear the churning of water or the slap of swimming hands.

When he opened his eyes, he saw his men floating limp in the water. He was so stunned that he loosened his grip for just an instant and plunged headlong into the darkness. He barely got his body straightened into a dive before he hit the surface. He struggled back to the top and swam to the ship and placed his hand on it. He would sink with his ship, captains sink with their ships, that's how it's supposed to be. He felt the cool, wet steel of the ship as he rubbed his hand over it. He was not afraid, but he was sad.

Into the ocean, he began to cry his own salty tears. He felt a hand on his shoulder and raised his hand to take it in his own, but the hand was ice cold and rough. The skin flaked between his fingers and when he brought it in front of his eyes he could see luminous white scales in the patches where the rough black had flaked away.

He turned to look, to see, but before he turned fully, he felt a jolt and a numbness followed by sleep.

He dreamed that he was brought back onto the ship and carried to a bunk. He dreamed that some of his men laid him down and made him warm, though they were only shadows to him. He felt cold metal on his temples and under his tongue and he could feel a flaky hand holding his. A motor was running in the background, but it was very quiet. He felt a jolt and saw a flash of colors; then all went black and all he heard was whirling, clicking, whirling, clicking, then silence.

He heard a baby cry and some voices he didn't know, but one seemed so soft and so familiar. He just wanted her to hold him.

Ron

It had been days since Ron had left the television room for anything besides eating and going to the bathroom. He didn't sleep much that he was aware of, but every now and then he felt like he was starting awake.

The coverage of the China event had been nonstop. No word from Ellen and the government was stone walling. It had been weeks since China went silent and dark. The news kept showing pictures of China at night – the lights weren't even coming on anymore. Initially there had been strange reports coming out of Japan, but it had gone dark less than eighteen hours after China

He kept calling Ellen's cell phone, but it just kept ringing – never even went to voice mail. For the last couple days, he'd left it ringing on the table beside the couch, but he'd stopped hoping she would pick up before that. He barely heard it anymore. He couldn't believe that he'd lost Aryana and Ellen. He felt as if he'd failed.

Everyone had a theory. Some thought the government was doing something it didn't want the world to see. Some thought China was shutting itself off from the world. But Ron knew what it was. It was the end. Ron looked over at Ellen's Bible on the end table; he had wanted to read it, but hadn't wanted to move any of her things. Maybe it had some answers after all. A whole country – over a billion people – gone overnight? What could that be but God?

People were getting funny emails too, millions of people all around the world. They were getting emails to send the terminally ill and the elderly to China. Send them and they'd be saved, is what the emails said. Those who made it would live forever.

The government said it was a hoax, a virus, but they never caught anyone. Ron hadn't gotten one, but Paul Hammersmith down the street had and Ron had gone to see it. There was no name in "from" box and it was impossible to reply.

Some people were forming groups and going. The government wasn't stopping anyone, but they were discouraging the trips. People had all kinds of theories about the Chinese being behind the emails too, but nobody knew.

That was what agitated Ron the most: nobody knew. He was sure the government didn't have many answers and the ones it did have were classified. He just wanted to know what had happened to Ellen.

He just sat there and let the news wash over him. He never thought he'd miss the reports of homicides and baby shakings, but those were all he wanted; they didn't have anything to do with his missing wife and daughter.

"Startling images just captured from satellites currently above Asia," the blonde anchorwoman said. Ron couldn't remember her name even though she was the person he'd spent most of almost the last week with. A satellite photo of Asia came on screen. "As you can see, here," she said. "The blackouts are spreading. Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia, the Philippine Islands, Taiwan, Singapore, and Cambodia have all gone dark."

She put her hand to her earpiece as if she were getting breaking news, but Ron could tell by her face that it was rehearsed.

"We're getting strange reports from Indonesia," she said. "And some from Australia as well. All we can gather so far is that whatever is causing this disturbance seems to be associated with the ocean."

Ron wanted to hit her in the face. Didn't she know that people were missing? Didn't she know that he just wanted his wife and daughter?

He hated them all: Ambassador Laurence, that damned assistant Shelley who had convinced Ellen to go ahead without him, and especially that smug stooge, Mr. Poole. If he were back in that conference room with him right now, Ron decided he would strangle Mr. Poole and there was nothing his statues from the C.I.A. or N.S.A., or whatever department they'd said they were from, could do about it.

"That Poole bastard will have answers," Ron said to himself. "He'll know where Ellen is, what's happened to the Ambassador, all of it."

There was a knock at the door. There had been plenty of knocks at the door since the incident, but he hadn't answered any of them. Some were friends coming to see how he was. Some were people from work, wondering if he was all right or if he'd killed himself. He'd only shouted once and that was so the police wouldn't kick the door in.

But this knock was soft and polite, as if it were someone who didn't know him well or even if anyone was home. The light rapping came a couple more times before it stopped.

“Mr. Bucks.” The voice was familiar, but Ron couldn’t bring a name to mind. “Are you home? It’s me, Jeremy. I have a package for you to sign for.”

Ron didn’t really feel like getting up. The package was probably just some clever way for his friends or his boss to see if he was still there.

Jeremy left after a couple minutes of silence and Ron continued what he’d been doing for the last week of his life. He watched the news, getting up only once to make himself a sandwich and get a glass of water. After a couple hours there was another knock at the door, this time it was louder.

“Mr. Bucks,” Jeremy said. “They said this thing has to be delivered today and they know you’re in there.” Jeremy knocked on the door again, harder this time. “It’s marked urgent and for your hands only. I can’t just leave it here. Please, just come sign it.”

Ron was going to just let him sit out there until he lost heart and left, but then he heard the sound of wood scraping on the porch followed by a soft thud. *Great, the God damned mailman is sitting on my porch; now if I don’t answer I’ll be getting a lot more knocks asking about that. Well played, Jeremy.*

Ron paused the TV and answered the door to a mailman who seemed pretty pleased with himself.

“Good morning, Mr. Bucks,” Jeremy said, his head cocked to the side and a stupid smile on his face.

“If you say so,” Ron said. “Just let me sign for the package.”

Jeremy pulled the package out from under his chair and stood up quickly. It had a lot of stamps on it. One he recognized was the seal of the U.S. embassy. It had been on all the letters he and Ellen had received when Aryana had gone missing.

Ron signed quickly and took the package inside. The door closed before Jeremy had even managed to tell Ron to have a nice day, and Ron could hear him slide the bench back into place and shuffle off the porch.

The seal had peaked his interest. Maybe they had news for him about Ellen.

He tore the wrapping off and tossed it into the chair that had been his life for the last couple weeks. Just a cardboard box was inside. It looked bent and old, as if someone had just found it on the street.

The only thing inside was a normal envelope with no postage or return address. All it had on it was “Ron” in handwriting he recognized.

He picked the envelope out of the box, not sure if he was ready to open it. What if it was goodbye? He was about to put it back and close the box but stopped short. What if she found Aryana? He had to know.

He opened the envelope slowly and unfolded it as if it were tissue paper.

Dear Ron,

I know you worry so I wanted to let you know I’m all right. We’re all all right. When we got here everything was crazy. There were lines of people and men in robes holding signs talking about children. The embassy sent a car for us and we’re in a secure, government bunker now with some other ambassadors and military police. They say there are similar bunkers, but we haven’t been able to communicate with them.

We sent this from Mongolia, it was a couple days' trip, but we couldn't send it from anywhere in China. Ambassador Laurence sent a letter too, but he didn't say who it was to, but whoever it was I'm sure he's getting us help.

There's no power anymore. We have lights and generators but we don't use them because Lieutenant Maoki won't allow it. He's the man in charge. All of the military and Chinese government people trust him, but almost nobody else. He told us that electricity is how whoever is behind this finds people. He makes them sound like monsters or aliens. Some of the ambassadors have been talking about having their security teams take control, but I hope they don't. I don't know what will happen if we start fighting amongst ourselves.

I don't know what else to say. I love you and miss you, and I'm sure we'll all be fine. I just needed you to know I was all right and thinking of you.

*Love,
Ellen*

Ron put it back in the box as if it were a piece of tissue paper again. The ringing phone seemed to be screaming in his ears. He just wanted to hear her voice. He stared at the phone until it seemed like it was the only thing in the room. Then he clicked it shut.

He held the remote, but he didn't want to press play. He didn't want to waste in his chair anymore, waiting for something good to happen. Ellen was alive and he needed to do something. But what could he do? Ellen was the one who took care of things. She'd written the letters to find out about Aryana; she'd made contact with Ambassador Laurence; she'd been the first one on the plane to China. What would Ellen do?

Ellen would beat drums, write letters, organize protests; Ellen would make it so they couldn't ignore her, but Ron didn't know where to start.

He slouched in his chair, disappointed in himself, but then an idea popped into his head. *Mr. Poole*. He would have answers, he could get things done. He would be able to help. But why would he want to? Why would he care? Mr. Poole was not the bleeding heart type. How could Ron make it matter to him?

As he sat there thinking, a big smile spread across Ron's face. *Mr. Poole really hates press conferences.*

He picked up the phone and dialed 411 to get the number for Channel Nine News. He talked to a couple of operators before he finally got transferred to the producer.

"Hello, Sir," the man said. "My name is Mr. Hillis, how can I help you?"

"My name is Ronald Bucks, sir," Ron said as he puzzled out exactly what to say. "I think I have something you'll be interested in."

"Channel Nine is interested in many things, Mr. Bucks, what exactly do you have?"

Ron composed himself. He knew he had to really sell this letter.

"My wife was in China when the incident happened. She was on staff with the new Ambassador to China, Ambassador Laurence." Ron was about to talk about how much he missed her and worried about her, but he needed an interview not a sob story.

"I'm sorry for your loss Mr. Bucks but —"

"I got a letter from her today." The words almost came falling out of him all at once. "It talks a little bit about what happened and what it's like now and I wanted to get the news out there."

There was a brief silence and, for a second, Ron thought he'd been hung up on.

“Okay, Mr. Bucks,” Mr. Hillis said in a voice that was clearly hiding excitement. “How about an interview? When works best for you?”

“I want a live interview,” Ron said. “I want it in four days and I want that blonde anchorwoman to do it, I want it done at my house, and I want this interview highly advertised and I want my name used.”

“Mr. Bucks, those are all highly unusual requests. Why does –”

“I want it live so that I won’t be edited,” Ron said with more force than he meant to. “I want it in four days so that you have time to advertise so that more people are watching because I believe people have a right to know. I want the blonde anchorwoman because I worked in P.R. for twenty years and I know how powerful it is to put a face on a catastrophe, and right now she’s it.” Ron took a breath to allow Mr. Hillis to say something if he had anything to say. After the brief silence, Ron said, “And I want it at my house because I don’t really feel like leaving.”

“Fine,” Mr. Hillis said. “But if any of this turns out to be made up or if you’re just doing this for publicity, you will be sued to the fullest –”

Ron flipped the phone shut and hit play on the TV. He would call back and apologize if he didn’t see any commercials about the interview in the next few hours, but he didn’t think it would be necessary.

By the next day, Ron was already getting knocks on his door. He still ignored them, but now they made him smile. By the second day, some people were walking around the house and peering in the windows to see if he was home. Everyone wanted to get the story first. He got a message from a competing news channel that offered him money to do the interview with them instead, but he didn’t care.

By the third day, Ron was starting to get nervous. What if his plan didn’t work? He thought Mr. Poole would have been here by now. He got a message from Mr. Hillis to confirm the time of the interview. He called back and said the six o’clock segment would be best and Mr. Hillis agreed.

Ron was getting ready to go to bed when he heard a knock at the door. The knock came again, accompanied by an unmistakable voice.

“Mr. Bucks,” Mr. Poole said. “I believe you wanted to speak to me.”

Ron went to the door and yanked it open. Mr. Poole had that sly smile and, just as before, was accompanied by three goons in suits.

“I am sorry about your daughter,” Mr. Poole said as he entered. “If she hadn’t disappeared, you and your wife would be much less annoying.”

Mr. Poole glanced up as he was unbuttoning his coat, but Ron controlled his anger.

Ron figured Mr. Poole would do all the talking and he was right.

“Very clever how you got me here, Mr. Bucks, I’ll give you that.” He started pacing just as he had in the conference room at City Hall. It made Ron think of Ellen. “You get me here by threatening to release information and you make yourself a minor celebrity in the process so making you go away is more difficult than it’s worth.” He shot Ron one of his strange looks. “If I weren’t so bothered by you, I’d be impressed.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out some trifolded papers. “Here’s what I have to offer you, take it or leave it.” He handed Ron the papers. “Basically, you cancel the interview and we’ll brief you on the situation. We’ll tell you all that we know and keep you up to date, but you will have to be confined to a hotel room in D.C., compliments of your government of course.”

“I don’t want the hotel.” Ron got as close as he could to Mr. Poole before the goons started to stir. “If I’m cancelling the interview, I get to know what you know, and I go where you go.”

Mr. Poole smiled and reached into his jacket again. He pulled out another bunch of trifolded papers. “Then you’ll want to sign these papers instead.”

Ron grabbed the papers and skimmed them:

Class AA Security Clearance Contract

Signee agrees at all stipulations and forfeitures listed below..... Freedom of Speech, forfeit.....

signee may have contact with only preapproved persons.....

Freedom of the Press, forfeit..... No written record of events that transpire for the duration of this contract is to exist, and no post-hand account is to be given, under penalty of Treason and death.....

Signee declares himself a possession of the state until such time as the event for which clearance has been granted is resolved.....

At the bottom were the signatures of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a couple people Ron had never heard of before – he figured they were the ones Mr. Poole reported to.

Ron held the pen over the papers, but something didn’t feel right. He didn’t trust Mr. Poole, and he hadn’t seemed put off at all by Ron’s demand that he go with him.

“I want you to tell me what’s going on.” Ron clicked the tip back into the pen. “Do you even know anything worth my signature?”

For an instant, Mr. Poole seemed surprised. Ron liked that.

“What would you like to know?” Mr. Poole began pacing. “Just ask and –”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Ron said. “Something nobody knows, and I’ll sign your papers and show you the letter.”

Mr. Poole’s pacing stopped with his back to Ron. He seemed to be sizing up the house, the pictures, the walls themselves. As if the way to trick Ron were written on them. When he turned back around he seemed less relaxed.

“Okay, Mr. Bucks.” Mr. Poole grabbed a Holy Bible from one of the end tables as he strode back to stand right in front of Ron. “But first you’ll swear that after I tell you, if this information is satisfactory, you will sign the papers before I tell you anything else.”

Ron almost laughed. Swearing on the Bible – he must have seen the cross on the wall and the figurines in the corner. They were Ellen’s; Ron hadn’t been to church in years. Not that he had any intention of breaking his word; Mr. Poole didn’t seem like a man to lie to.

Ron put his right hand on the book, “I swear.”

Almost before the words were said, the book was back on the end table.

“I’ll give you the general situation; the details come with your signature.”

“I’m all ears.” Ron said, crossing his arms over his chest, trying not to appear anxious even though part of him felt like a child getting information that he wasn’t supposed to have.

“We believe that China has been overtaken by an invasive species.”

It came out so quickly. The reality seemed to wash over Ron in waves. *Aliens?*

“We believe this species is responsible for the epidemic of disappearances that occurred prior to the blackout, including your daughter’s.”

Ron was speechless. It seemed like a horror movie, like something that could never really happen. So many questions, but the words seemed too big for his mouth.

"We don't know what they are, what they look like, or how they're doing this, but we're working on it." The smug smile had returned. "Any questions?"

Ron looked at the men in suits standing by the door: a smile, a smirk, anything to let him know it was a joke, a trick, a way to shock him into silence, but they just stood, big and motionless as ever. *It's true.*

Ron spread the papers on the table and signed where he had to. As soon as he'd finished his last letter, Mr. Poole grabbed the papers and put them back inside his jacket.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Bucks," Mr. Poole said as he moved toward the door with his goons following. "Pack for warm weather, I hear Mongolia is beautiful this time of year. A car will be here in the morning at nine a.m. Please be ready on time."

Ming Han

Ming Han lay awake, motionless in the final moments before dawn. When there was nothing to be done, he thought about the evacuation day. He woke up with it and went to bed with it.

The elderly had been taken first, his father among them. They'd thought helping the Walkers and those little monsters they called the children would help the villagers. It was all a deception. They had been led to believe they would be allies, not pawns. Or maybe they had just hoped so; the stranger never said so himself. He just said, "The children think it would be a nice memory for you to have." Thinking about it now, Ming Han realized how ominous it sounded. They had been fools.

He and a couple of other men had escaped with a few women and children. They found what they could to eat and only went by the rivers to fill their jugs and water bottles. It was hard living, but they'd adjusted well to the situation over the past months.

The countryside was vast so they encountered few people. They'd killed a few Walkers during the night watches though. One of them was the man who used to preach in the village square. Ming Han wished they could have killed him twice.

The few people they'd met didn't know what had happened. They had heard everything from, "the cities are empty," to "the cities are at war with the government." It seemed like rumors to Ming Han and his small group of villagers; they weren't sure who to trust.

The unspoken consensus was that Ming Han was the leader. He wasn't sure why they'd chosen him, but he assumed it had something to do with his father, and this made him despise the position a little.

He missed his father. Everyone missed those who'd been taken. Most assumed they were dead along with the soldiers, but there were many fantastical theories that hinged on their being kept alive. Ming Han saw hope in them, but no reason; his father was dead and he was sure he had silently condescended to the little monsters with that look of his, even when he was on his knees, if he'd knelt at all. This was how he chose to remember his father, and it made him smile.

Lee Sin's son, Kung, had attached himself to Ming Han. Lee Sin had been lost in the escape; Han had seen him fall. Kung was almost twelve so he put on a strong face for the others and got done what Ming Han told him, but Han could see that the boy was sad.

All of the men slept in a circle around the women and children, and Kung was usually right beside Ming Han. More than once Han had woken up with the boy's head on his shoulder; this morning was no different and, as usual, he eased out from beneath Kung's head, making sure not to disturb the boy and never mentioned it.

The last group they'd met had fallen in with them – a group of six women and one old man named Lee. He'd offered Ming Han his rifle if they would be allowed to travel with the group. They could have come for free, but everyone felt safer with Ming Han in possession of the rifle, so he took it.

Two of the women travelling with the old man were his wife, who everyone called Mrs. Lee, and daughter, Nisha. His daughter was pretty but shy, so Ming Han hadn't tried to talk to her; but he did walk beside her whenever he could and smiled when she glanced at him. Once he thought he saw her smile back, but he could not be certain.

The group had been travelling north for several days. Initially, they had headed east, but upon hearing the varied reports from the cities, they had changed course. They were now headed for the Great Wall and, past that, Mongolia.

Dawn was breaking so everyone started packing their bedrolls and improvised tents. Some of the women were making a small breakfast of rice. The men always got to eat first; Ming Han suspected that it was the perk Kung enjoyed most about being counted among the men.

"Stay ahead of the group today, Kung," Ming Han said in between rushed bites of rice. "You're on scout duty."

The boy nodded, but Han was sure he smiled as soon as he turned to leave. Kung loved being on scout duty, and he was fun to watch. Every now and then, Ming Han would look ahead and see his crouched little figure sneaking from bush to bush. He wasn't actually good at being sneaky, but it had been about a week since their last Walker sighting so Ming Han felt safe giving the task to the boy.

It was so beautiful out, he wanted to walk beside Nisha. They had never shared more than small talk and polite conversation; nobody had really – in the woods, everyone kept quiet. Still, he liked being around her and she was either too shy to ask him to leave or liked his being around. Either way, he was staying.

Ming Han felt a gentle tap on his shoulder. He turned to see Mr. Lee hunched before him. "There's a field up ahead," the old man said. "It's a wheat field, very wide open." He had his hands clasped together and kept regarding them in between sentences. "I could show you the way around if you like."

Ming Han took the old man's hands in his as he'd seen his father do to old men in the village a thousand times. "Thank you, Mr. Lee," he said. "Going around is a great idea. Take us to the east, please."

The old man smiled and didn't seem quite as hunched as he shuffled to the front of the line. His father had always told him that old men needed to feel useful, and Mr. Lee had been sagging more every day since he'd surrendered his rifle.

Ming Han glanced over at Nisha and caught a glimpse of her smile before she turned away.

They walked for a couple hours and rested, then a couple more and another rest. Most had gotten used to the routine. Those that didn't were no longer with the group. That day, though, the pace was a little slower because Mr. Lee was in front. After a while, Ming Han started to wonder where Kung had gone. He hadn't been aware that Mr. Lee would be leading; he wouldn't have known to slow his pace.

Ming Han worried for a little over an hour, but then they crested a hill and he saw the boy at the bottom and Laoniuwan in the distance, where the Great Wall met the Yellow River. As soon as Kung turned and saw them, he came running up the hill.

"Children," was the first thing Kung said after he caught his breath. "The children are in the river by the Wall."

Somehow, Ming Han managed to get his hand in the air before everyone gasped.

"Are you sure, Kung?" Ming Han said. "It's getting dark. Could they have just been people?"

Kung stood as straight as he could and looked Ming Han straight in the eyes. "No."

For a moment, Ming Han could see Lee Sin in his boy's face; a spitting image, sure, forceful, even defiant.

"Did they see you?"

"No," Kung said. "I saw them through the trees from the top of the hill." He looked away at nothing in particular. "They were all walking that funny way they walk. Do you remember?"

Ming Han thought back to the day in the valley when that little thing had walked behind him. It had looked so strange, so horrid. He had been frightened, but he did remember how they walked. They walked as if it were inevitable that they'd get where they were going, as if nothing could stop them.

"How many did you see?" Ming Han said, gently turning Kung back toward him.

"Three," he said. "They went in the river and didn't come back out."

It would be dark within the hour and Ming Han wasn't excited about the idea of trying to sleep with those things around.

"Mr. Lee, you and Kung stay here with the women and children." Ming Han tossed the rifle to the old man. "That leaves seven of us and only three of them."

One of the other men stepped forward. "Even if it was twenty of us and two of them, it would be hopeless." The man was one from the village, Chan something. "We've seen them fight, we'll just get shocked and drug away like the soldiers."

The other men nodded in agreement; some grabbed their wives and held them close. The man was right, but something needed to be done.

"Yes, we've seen them fight," Ming Han said. "Their only weapon is shock." He pointed to Laoniuwan. "That's a fishing village. I'm sure there are more than a couple rubber wet suits for us to wear into the river."

Some of the men cast their eyes downward; others looked around for someone else to come up with a reason not to go. They were scared and Ming Han couldn't blame them, but this had to be done.

Moments later, women were kissing their husbands and everyone was saying goodbye as if Ming Han had sentenced them all to death. He wasn't sure he hadn't, but he didn't see any other way.

"Let me come with you," Kung said as Ming Han was putting the knives they had into a bag.

"They need you more here," Ming Han said. "We can't just leave them with Mr. Lee."

Kung was quiet for a moment. He did not leave but just stood behind Ming Han in silence. Ming Han wanted to say something Lee Sin might have said, but he couldn't form the words. He slung the bag of knives and other makeshift weapons over his shoulder.

“We will come get you all when the coast is clear.” Ming Han smiled and lowered his head to meet the boy’s gaze. “I’m sure there are some abandoned beds in Laoniuwan. A bed sounds nice, doesn’t it?”

Kung didn’t say anything. Instead, he turned to leave, but no sooner had Ming Han’s hand fallen from the boy’s shoulder than he turned around and hugged Ming Han around the waist. The hug was quick. And silent.

It was dark by the time the men entered Laoniuwan. It was an old town built from stone overgrown with moss. It looked as if the buildings had risen from the ground and brought the vines and bushes with them. It was beautiful in the ancient way that all old, Chinese towns were beautiful. Ming Han hoped they would all get to see it in the daylight.

They searched the houses by the shore first, but they only found two diving suits, a small fishing spear, and a handheld spear gun. Ming Han grabbed an underwater flashlight as well. He decided that if there were children around and the children saw the flashlight they would turn it off as they’d turned off the soldier’s vehicles. This would let the men prepare themselves.

They also found a couple of fishing knives. Most were sharper than the ones they’d brought so they used those instead. When they didn’t find any more diving suits in the other houses, one of the men spoke up.

“There isn’t enough for all of us, and nobody should go in without one,” Chan said. “We should draw –”

“No,” Ming Han said. “Only two need to go. Men with wives or children are staying.” Ming Han grabbed one of the suits. “And I’m going regardless; this was my idea after all.”

He smiled as he took his shoes and pants off and started putting the suit on; he wondered if his father would be proud of him.

Without more words, Chan started putting the remaining suit on. Once they were all ready, they walked out onto the edge of the dock. Chan was about to get in the water when Ming Han stopped him.

“Wait,” he said as he clicked the flashlight on. He had tied it to an old fishing pole. He cast the light out into the river. It didn’t even make it a third of the way across, but it floated on the top and the men stood, breathless.

Ming Han flinched every couple seconds, thinking it had gone out, but it was just the motion of the small waves on the surface obscuring the light. After ten minutes or so, Ming Han reeled in the flashlight.

“Seems all clear to me,” he said.

Most of the men nodded and turned to go, but not Chan.

“I see a light,” Chan said. “Look there.”

He pointed across the river where the Great Wall entered it. The other men looked. When the water moved a certain way, Ming Han thought he saw a light, but he couldn’t be sure.

“It doesn’t matter now,” Ming Han said. “We can come back in –”

“What if they’re in there?” Chan said. “What if they come while we’re asleep?” He grabbed the flashlight from Ming Han and slipped it on his own wrist. “Let’s do it while we’ve got these suits on.” Chan started untying a boat before Ming Han could say anything.

Ming Han didn’t like it, but he was right. So, he tied the flashlight to his wrist, and stepped into the boat. Ming Han looked at Chan to start the motor, but he moved to the side; there was no motor behind him. Chan smiled and looked at the oars. Ming Han rolled his eyes; he had his back to the river. He grabbed the oars and started rowing.

Chan used the flashlight to look into the water. Ming Han was surprised by how far the light allowed him to see. It illuminated ten, maybe fifteen, feet, but his heart skipped a beat every time a fish swam through the light. A river had never seemed so frightening to him; it was as if the river itself was out to get him.

When they reached the Wall, Ming Han found a rock to tie the boat off. Then, he and Chan climbed into the water. The Great Wall came into the river a couple yards to the right of where he'd tied the boat off. He signaled to Chan and they swam for it.

Above the water, the Wall had looked almost pristine, but the submerged section was weathered and crumbling. As they swam toward the submerged part of the wall another fish swam in front of the light, a big fish. It was immediately followed by another, and then a third. Each one looked less and less like a fish. He gripped the big fillet knife tied to his other wrist and began scanning the water.

Twice he passed over a shadow but it was always gone as soon as he brought the light back to it. *If it were them they'd turn the light off. They would turn it off just as they had with the trucks.*

He saw the light clearly as they neared the opening in the Wall. It was as if it was coming from inside the wall. It seemed strangely dim, but as they got closer he could see more light coming from behind that one.

The walls were smooth as they entered – smoother than rock should be. It felt odd; it felt modern, metallic. They swam through the hole and after a little ways had to crawl. The crawling was hard because the walls and floor were so smooth. They were cold too, not like the water or the riverbed, but a penetrating cold, like a steel hand rail in the winter.

Almost at once, they were both lying on dry, cold metal. No more water. Ming Han gazed down the shaft. There were lights every thirty feet or so. The tunnel seemed to go on forever. All the walls were metal, as if someone had painted the place with steel. There were supports and braces built in random places; the old rocks must have crumbled from the tunneling. Ming Han almost laughed. He wondered if the Huns had ever thought of this.

There were cots – long, metal slabs built out from the walls. They had strange metallic orbs where they met the wall. They were stacked about three high, a set every fifteen feet or so. It wasn't until they got closer that Ming Han noticed the people lying inside them.

At first he thought it was just a few, but there were people in all of them. Even further down the tunnel, he could see feet and hands dangling off the cots. He wondered how far back it went, how many people there were. *All those that had gone missing, probably more by now.*

"Who are they?" Chan asked in barely more than a whisper.

"Everyone," Ming Han said. "All the ones that have been taken are in here."

Ming Han stood silent, trying to comprehend the gravity of what he was seeing, of what he'd just said. There were close to a million people stacked three high, trapped in the ancient stones that had protected their ancestors.

As he walked by, he looked at their faces beneath the clear covering on the top of the metallic orbs. None of them moved, but all of the expressions were different. Most of the children were scared; the adults were less predictable: some seemed to be crying but no tears rolled down their cheeks, some looked angry, and there were even a few that were smiling. A set of banded black cords came out of every metallic headrest and disappeared into the cot. Ming Han wondered what the wires did, what kind of technology was beneath the metal.

He'd passed about ten sets of cots, all of the people were men, and they were all in uniform, army uniform. He was going to be sick. These had to be the men from the evacuation. He looked at their faces. He didn't know them, but he'd put them there. He was sure of it.

What were all these people doing here? What were the machines doing to them? He could see breath mist every now and then on the clear coverings. Were the machines keeping them alive?

"We should try to wake them up," Chan said.

Ming Han wanted to agree, but it seemed too risky.

"I don't think these men would want to talk to us too much. We put them here, remember?" Ming Han said. "And we don't know what we're dealing with."

"We should get out of here then," Chan said. "Just because the children weren't in the river doesn't mean they aren't coming back."

He was right, but Ming Han couldn't leave; he couldn't look away. He stood in a corridor filled with his unconscious countrymen: mothers, fathers, children – what if his father was here?

He walked faster, looking at fewer faces as he went.

Chan called to him to stop, to come back, but he couldn't. He would check all the faces. He would find his father, Lee Sin, Lee Ho, and the rest of the village. They had to be here. He had started to run and slipped on the floor. It was so smooth, smoother than anything he'd felt before. Chan helped him up.

"We should go," Chan said.

Ming Han shook free of Chan's grasp. "You were right, we should wake them. Let's find everyone from the village. The soldiers are here. They must be close."

Chan grabbed his collar again and spun him so they were face to face.

"We should leave. We will not find them."

Ming Han shoved Chan back. "You said we should wake them so let's do it."

"You were right," Chan said. "It's too risky?"

Ming Han was furious. *Chan is a coward.* Ming Han ran further down the corridor. He did not look back, but he could hear Chan's feet close behind. They were getting louder. Ming Han knew he would be caught soon.

Just as the footsteps were closing in, Ming Han cut behind one of the cots, grabbed the banded black cords, and held his knife to them.

"Stop," Ming Han said. "Or I'll cut them,"

Chan froze.

"If I come, you'll cut them," he said. "And if I leave, you'll probably still cut them, so what's stopping me?"

"The 'probably'," Ming Han said.

Chan put his hands up and backed away.

"You're okay with killing this man?" Chan said. "A man you've never met, who probably has his own family and village?"

"Maybe it will wake him up. If I were him, that's what I'd want."

"You're not doing it to free him," Chan said a little louder now. "He's faceless to you, an experiment. Let's find your father, you can cut those cords."

He looked down at the face in the metallic ball. The breath was fogging up the window. When he inhaled, Ming Han recognized the face.

"This man is not faceless to me," he said. "I took this man to meet my father when the crew came. He was in charge. I rode with him, watched him try to defeat the children."

“But you do not know him,” Chan said. “He is just another man to you.” Chan took another step forward and took the knife from Ming Han’s hand. “We will bring the other men here tomorrow and decide what to do, but now is not the time.”

Ming Han felt the other knife in his back pocket. He could draw it right now, cut the cords, but Chan was big and he was probably right too. He would have to wait. As he walked out, he looked back at the man on the cot and touched the knife in his pocket, but he did not turn back.

As they surfaced, outside the wall, Ming Han saw a similar light coming from the submerged portion of the wall on the other side of the river. *They’re using the whole wall.*

He tried not to think about it as he and Chan swam back to the boat and rowed to the dock silently, and when the other men asked for news Chan just told them it was safe. They kept looking at Ming Han. He didn’t say anything. Even when they got back to the group and gave the good news, Ming Han was silent. Even as everyone was settled into beds at the small inn, Ming Han was silent. Hours after everyone was asleep, Ming Han was silent. Then he heard Chan snore.

He slipped out from under his warm blankets and put on everything but his shoes; they were noisy. He slipped out of the inn and down to the old boat house where they’d left the wet suits.

Putting on the suit and rowing the boat to the cave was a blur. All Ming Han could think about was waking them up – waking them all up. An army was in the Wall and it would protect his people.

He struggled up the slippery tunnel and found his way back to the army man’s cot. He pressed the knife to the cords, but then just looked down at the man for a long time. He was almost certain that the mist was coming and going faster, as if the man could sense he was there. *Is he nervous or excited?*

Ming Han didn’t even watch himself cut them. He kept his eyes on the man’s face. The mist disappeared almost as soon as he cut the cords, and it did not come back.

Ming Han waited; he stared at the clear plastic, willing the breath to come. It had to come. He was not a killer.

“Breathe!” Ming Han shouted so close to the window that the mist his own breath caused made him draw back for a second.

Ming Han started CPR, but the man’s mouth was shielded by the clear cover so he could only press on the chest. It wasn’t working. He pushed harder until he felt like he would break the man’s chest. He needed air. Ming Han started beating the window with the handle of the knife. He had hoped it would be glass, but it was some sort of resilient plastic. The knife and his hand kept bouncing off the window into the metal frame of the head casing. He cut his hand on the metal edges and tore open his knuckles, but he just kept beating on the window.

It cracked and began to give. Ming Han swung harder and harder. He broke at least one finger and dislocated others, but he just put more force into every swing. As soon as it broke, Ming Han put his mouth to the soldier’s and started breathing. Three pushes on the chest, then a breath into the man’s mouth. He repeated this for what seemed like an eternity. He started trying to remember how long someone can go without breath before they are a vegetable. He was about to give up, but then he felt breath shoot back into his own mouth and pulled back so fast he almost fell down.

The first thing Ming Han saw was the chest rise and fall. He would have smiled at saving a life, but then remembered that it was he who almost ended it. When his gaze made its way to

the man's face he was met with a pair of open, confused eyes. The man's eyes darted around the room. He looked more frightened by the second, like a scared child. Ming Han took a step forward to help, but a danger in the man's eyes, like a wounded animal, made him step back.

The man seemed at war with his own body, as if even rolling his head from side to side were a struggle. Movement started to return, but the man's fear and confusion seemed to increase with every second of immobility. He thrashed his head back and forth and flexed his fingers into fists over and over again. It was as if he was trying to escape from a giant, invisible fist.

Suddenly, the man just shot up into a sitting position, spun, and planted his feet on the floor. When he eased himself off the cot he fell as if his legs hadn't been underneath him at all. He shouted and began wiggling his legs and kicking all around as he lay prone on the floor.

After some time, the man worked himself into a kneeling position, and eventually a very unstable standing one.

"Sir," Ming Han said. "My name is —"

Before he could even finish the sentence, the man started as if he had forgotten Ming Han were even there, and, wobbly as his legs were, he seemed about to run for it.

"Wait," Ming Han said. "I'm here to help. You know me. Back at the village —"

"Who are you?" The man looked around the room. "What is this place? Where are we?"

Ming Han started to answer, but trailed off as the man started examining his own hands. It was as if he didn't recognize his own body. He crouched and stood, measured himself against the wall like a child. He even took his boot off to look inside.

"Size nine." He said so softly that Ming Han could barely hear him. "What's going on?" He seemed about to cry. "What year is it?"

Ming Han was shocked by the question. He looked over at the machine. What could it have done to this man?

"We'll talk about that later," Ming Han said as he calmly approached the frightened man. "My name is Ming Han and I'm here to help. What is your name?"

"Chun Kai," he said, still turning his hand back and over again, never really seeming to understand it.

"Come with me, Chun Kai." Ming Han gently put his arm around the man's shoulders. "We'll get you some food."

Cedric Mankins

As soon as he walked in the lab, Dr. Mankins knew he was in on something very important. It was like nothing he'd ever seen. So alien and, at the same time, so grotesquely humanoid. He didn't know what he'd been involved in, but he was anxious and afraid all at once.

"I couldn't believe it either," Dr. John Megman said. "Incredible isn't it?"

Cedric had no words. John was his boss, but the directions that had come with this package stipulated that Cedric was to be in charge of research on this specimen. The order was by the authority of both the U.S. and Chinese governments.

"Have we run any tests?" Cedric managed to say.

"No," John said. "I wasn't even supposed to open it without you, but I didn't know that until afterward."

John fished around in the inside pocket of his lab coat and brought out an envelope.

"This came with it too," John said. "It says for your eyes only."

Cedric took the envelope. It was sealed with wax, real wax. The seal was the shape of his old fraternity. It was where he had first met Dr. Kitsuno Mokashi. They had become fast friends. When he turned it over, Cedric recognized the handwriting on the back as Mokashi's as well.

He told John to prep the subject while he broke the seal on the envelope. He was surprised to find it was hand written.

Dear Cedric,

The contents of this package are of both the highest import as well as highest level of classification. What you will find is something you have never seen before. It is another sentient life form. I cannot say with a certainty that it originated on this planet, but I believe it has.

It is not a solitary specimen. I have examined others, but have not been allowed to include my findings in this envelope for fear it would be intercepted. We cannot let them know what we know about them. You must run the tests yourself; the results will seem unbelievable, but I tell you, as frightening as they may be, they are correct.

The first specimen we obtained was by chance, luck, and from it we learned how best to fight and capture these things. This specimen was obtained by a specially equipped unit. As I write this, I am aware that my country is nearing some sort of terrible event. The blackouts have become so widespread and common that people are more surprised when there is power than when there is not.

The rate of disappearance has also increased, and the numbers are approaching a million missing. Our government has been keeping it quiet, but they lose control more every day. I still don't know why they take people, or what they do, but we are working on it. For how much longer I cannot say.

I hope this specimen allows you to prepare for what is to come. I do not think they will be content with China. Good luck, Cedric, and give Caren and the kids my love.

Your Friend,

Dr. Kitsuno Mokashi

Cedric just stared at the letter for a second. He was sad to think what had befallen his friend so far away. It had been so long since they'd spoken. Mokashi hadn't seen Nora since she was a baby; he would have only seen pictures of Aaron, and he didn't know that Caren had tumors in her spine, that she was dying.

It was so much to process. Aliens? No, Mokashi had said he didn't believe they were aliens. But then where did they come from? How many were there? Cedric folded the letter back into the envelope and put it in his jacket pocket.

Cedric just stared at it. No eyes or ears; a mouthful of razor sharp teeth with only a small opening in the back too small to be a throat; webbed fingers and toes; and the skin – that was the worst part. It seemed burned and deformed. It was rough to the touch, but in certain parts, it had fallen away to reveal beautiful, almost luminous white scales.

He looked over at John who was eyeing the specimen as if it were the sexiest woman in the room.

"Let's get some samples to the lab for DNA testing," Cedric said as he flipped the switch to the recording device.

They waited for the red lights on the cameras and microphones to click on.

“Dr. Megman will be taking some skin and blood samples to run tests for DNA, blood type, and anything else we can think of.”

John took the scrapings without issue, but when he brought the syringe over, he was unable to find a vein even after scraping the deformed skin away.

“Subject appears to have no circulatory apparatus that can be located on the surface of the skin,” Cedric ran his hand along its arm, displacing the ashy skin as he went. “This is most likely due to the scaly nature of the specimen’s skin. It does not feel rough once the, apparently deformed, outer layer is removed.”

“We’ll just get the fluid samples during dissection,” John said.

Cedric nodded and grabbed a scalpel from the tray behind him. He applied pressure to the specimen’s chest, starting at the base of the neck.

“There is no resistance to imply solid skeletal structure,” Cedric said, his hand hovering over the specimen. “I will start the incision at the base of the neck.”

He breached with the scalpel and drew it straight down the middle of the specimen. About halfway down the torso, Cedric heard a ripping sound and managed to jump clear of the splash zone; Dr. Megman was not so lucky.

“Jesus,” John said. “It was like there was a bomb in there.” He looked up. “There’s some on the damn ceiling.”

Cedric traced his index finger and thumb along John’s lab coat.

“The substance is extremely viscous,” Cedric said as he rolled it between his finger and thumb. “It is clear when spread thin, but the larger clumps of it appear to be blue.” Cedric grabbed a sterile bag from the tray behind him. “This will be sent to the lab for chemical analysis.”

“Holy shit,” John said as Cedric was still cataloging the bag. “Dr. Mankins, look at this.”

Back at the table, Cedric peered into the exploded chest cavity. It took him a couple seconds to gather his thoughts and a few more to make words.

“Subject appears to lack any form of internal organs or organelles,” Cedric rooted around in the chest cavity. “It also appears that the ribs are made of cartilage.” He dug deeper. “And the spine as well.”

“How can it stand?” John said. “Bipeds can’t have spines of cartilage, can they?”

“I’ve never seen one,” Cedric said. “But apparently they can.”

The spine lay exposed and Cedric couldn’t help but think of Caren. Six tumors out just two weeks ago and she had walked the kids to the bus stop this morning. The tumors would be back, they both knew it, but for now she would at least not have much pain.

John poked Cedric in the shoulder. He must have been standing, daydreaming. No doubt John knew what was on Cedric’s mind. They nodded at one another and returned to their work.

Cedric couldn’t believe this thing. It defied everything he’d ever learned about anatomy, human or otherwise. There had to be organs.

Cedric took up the scalpel again and continued his incision toward the waist. Dr. Megman shielded himself in case of another blast, but there was none.

He unloaded more of the strange substance that filled the body cavity onto the table as John inched his way forward as if still anticipating another shower.

“In lower abdomen,” Cedric said. “Subject appears to have stomach-like and intestine-like constructs.”

Cedric motioned to John to help him lift the stomach and intestines from the body. As they did, Cedric noticed that they were rigid, more like parts from an engine than soft organs from a body.

"The constructs are –" John struggled for the right words. He was a neurologist by trade, but had been away from the table for a couple years.

"Hard," Cedric cut in. "Petrified, to be exact." He ran his hands along the tangle of digestive system turned to stone. "They appear to have shriveled or shrunk prior to being petrified."

"Incredible," John said.

He and John put it on an adjacent table. "We will send this to the lab for testing." He left John to make the notations on the lab tag. "Make sure it's carbon dated too," Cedric said. "That will be one way we can see how old this thing is."

"Good idea," John was scribbling the instructions on the lab tag.

The body lay dismantled like some odd toy on the table. They'd done enough for now – so many labs to run.

"I think we have plenty of specimens to work on for now," Cedric said. "Let's get this thing on ice and wait for the results."

A look of confusion, almost incredulity, was frozen on John's face.

"You want to stop?"

Cedric was sad that he couldn't be as excited as John. All he wanted was to get back to his wife. This specimen, however groundbreaking and important, would be here tomorrow. She didn't have many tomorrows left.

"I think that is best," Cedric said, not looking John in the face. "We've probably already overloaded the lab. This stuff could be backed up for days in there."

"We can mark it as priority," John had almost scoffed. "It said all discovery pertaining to this specimen is to supersede all other works at this facility."

Cedric knew John could tell when he was making excuses. They'd been colleagues for ten years before John had become his boss.

"At least let me get at the brain," John said. "Let's just get that cranium off and add one more thing to the test heap." He started walking toward the table. When Cedric did not follow, he said, "I'll run the tests on the brain myself, just come do the play-by-play."

John wanted this one – Cedric could hear it, see it, smell it. The desire was emanating from John like a glorious body odor.

"Okay," Cedric handed the bone saw to John.

John revved the saw a couple of times then held the trigger down and slowly lowered the whirling blade to the side of the cranium. As soon as it contacted the skin, John almost lost control of the saw. It dug deep into the specimen's head, almost sinking to the trigger.

"What the hell," John was trying to free the saw from the skull.

Cedric put his hand on John's chest, gently pushing him back. Once John's hands were off the saw, Cedric stuck his finger in the hole on the guarded side.

"Subject's skull seems to be made of cartilage just like its spine and ribs." He got his finger under the tip of the saw guard and wedged it out. As soon as the saw was out, the same gelatinous substance that had been in the body cavity began to ooze from the wound.

"This thing doesn't make any sense," John said. "No heart, lungs, eyes, or anything, and this gooey, jello stuff falling out of it all over the place."

John was right. Something didn't add up. *How can it have no eyes or ears? No navigation by sight and no sonar? How can it live?*

Cedric looked at the webbed fingers and toes and grabbed the scalpel.

"Subject must have some sensory organs," Cedric said almost mindlessly as he snatched the scalpel from the tray and moved toward the cadaver.

"Wait." John pulled Cedric away from the table. "Let me get that brain out, then you can do whatever you want."

John took the scalpel from Cedric before he could object. He cut away the rest of the cranium with it. Cedric watched, for the most part. The only thing he did was help John roll it over so that he could make sure to cut under the brain stem.

Once it was out, John put it in a container that had a special solution that Cedric had forgotten the formula for long ago. It was special for brains, and that was all Cedric really knew about it anymore.

Cedric was about to resume his search for the sensory organs when John grabbed his arm.

"Cedric, look." He spun Cedric to face the container in which the brain floated.

The solution was bubbling, and every now and again a branch of tiny lightning jumped around until it seemed to dissolve in the water.

"I'm going to run some tests right now." John nearly sprinted to the container.

"Apparently this thing is still active in a big way; don't want to miss anything important."

John didn't even look back, let alone wait for Cedric's approval.

Cedric resumed skimming layers off the side of the specimen's head. The ear had to be on the head; he didn't know where, but most likely on the side. Once he'd removed all of the deformed, black flesh, he saw an odd gathering of scales on the side of the head almost in line with the bottom jaw bone.

When he cut them away, all that remained was a small hole. An ear? He carefully rolled the body and checked the other side the same way, finding another hole. Both went inward – definitely not a wound.

Cedric removed the rest of the deformed flesh from the face. The scales underneath really were some of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen, but they made the teeth look sharper and much more gruesome due to the black backdrop of the mouth.

The scales around where the eyes should be seemed odd. They had a pale glow different than the rest. Cedric sunk the scalpel in like a box cutter until he met no resistance and cut out the scaly circle.

He popped the cluster out, and when he held it up to the light, it acted like a prism. But when he turned it around, it was completely clear – perfectly transparent. It was no less than an inch thick, and from the front it was opaque, but from the back side, it was like a pair of glasses.

"Incredible," Cedric said, wishing John had been there to say it.

Carefully, he put the cluster on the tray with the other specimens to be tested. When he returned to the table and gazed down into the hole he'd just dug, an eye gazed back at him.

It was terrible in a familiar way. It was open wide and never blinked. It was like some sort of sick Mona Lisa that followed him everywhere, except it was bone-chillingly blue.

Lieutenant Maoki

It was getting dark in the bunker. The main room was very large with computer screen and big television monitors, but Lieutenant Maoki wouldn't let them use the lights or anything else that ran on electricity, and it had been too long since they'd ventured out for wood, paper, or even candles if they were lucky; anything to burn. He could tell it was starting to upset some of the people in the bunker, especially the higher ups.

He was in charge, but only by rank. If enough of the men with their own security desired to, they could take control by force. He hoped that wouldn't happen: whatever was going on in the cities and on the coast, and in the countryside for all he knew, it wouldn't get better with them fighting among themselves.

He had sent Chen out with a couple men looking for the U.S. Ambassador's party. They were three weeks late; at first he had just assumed setbacks, but now he just figured they'd been taken. He only sent the search parties out to keep the man's secretary quiet. She had been hurt when they'd left; a deep cut in her leg she'd gotten during the rush to the bunker. She was recovering now, but very annoying about looking for the ambassador.

"Mr. Maoki," a voice said from beside the door. Looking, he saw that it was Mr. Baynes.

"Yes, Mr. Baynes," said Lieutenant Maoki. He had given up on trying to get the man to address him by his rank.

"I've just received news on my secure line," Mr. Baynes said as his security detail filed in behind him, making the room seem to shrink. He was some sort of representative of a weapons manufacturer with D.O.D. as well as C.D.D. connections.

"I thought I told you not to use that thing," Maoki said. "We can't be sure any lines are secure."

"I assure you, this one is, if any," Mr. Baynes smiled in the way Lieutenant Maoki had become accustomed to, in a way that said he didn't care. "And I only had it on long enough to check the incoming messages, I sent nothing out." He seemed to apologize with his tone and condescend with his expression – all at the same time. "Either way, I think you'll forgive me when you hear the news."

Lieutenant Maoki looked around at the security guards; this was the last man he wanted to agitate. He didn't trust this secure line or any faceless sources of information. He remembered the lines in the streets that were following the orders to go to processing centers. He remembered the Walkers all over the city, and the hand-written note that had been delivered to his desk just before the chaos.

He had been ordered to intercept the Ambassador outside the U.S. embassy and take him to the bunker. Most of the others had shown up because they'd been tipped off by their connections. All were done by hand-written message; Lieutenant Maoki didn't trust any sort of electronic communication.

"So what's this news then?" Lieutenant Maoki said.

"Well, it's just fantastic," Mr. Baynes said. "Let's just call everyone in and spread the joy."

Before Lieutenant Maoki could decline, Mr. Baynes sent some of his security guards to gather the others to the main room. In a couple minutes, people started filing in. Lieutenant Maoki could tell that some of the Chinese did not appreciate the harshness of Mr. Bayne's guards. They did not understand Chinese customs and were, therefore, seen as rude. The resentment the Chinese had for Mr. Baynes and his security guards was the only thing that had kept Maoki in power this long, and he could feel it slipping with every cold meal and every cold night.

Almost as soon as everyone was seated, Mr. Baynes raised his arms in a very triumphant pose and said, "There is a ship."

Some talked amongst themselves, others sat either in shock or disbelief; Lieutenant Maoki sat as if he had not heard.

"It is a U.S. destroyer named Valley Forge." He began pacing and smiling in that way he did. "I have received this information through my secure line and from reliable sources. They have come to save us."

The room nearly exploded as each group tried to talk over every other group about what this could mean, if they should go, and how they would get there.

"It doesn't matter," Lieutenant Maoki said, shouting above the noise. "If we leave this place, we will not be safe. We have to wait for help to come to us."

"I believe we all appreciate your caution," Mr. Baynes said as he nodded to the crowd almost patronizingly, as if begging them to nod along for Maoki's own sake. "But this ship is our help, and we must exert some effort to free ourselves."

Lieutenant Maoki was furious. Baynes had come up with about every subtle way in the book to call him a coward, but he'd never dared in front of the rest.

"Mr. Baynes, I –"

"I know, Mr. Maoki," he said as if he were talking to a child. "You will object, but I did not call this meeting to circumvent your authority or suggest we disobey you at all."

The room was silent as Mr. Baynes gave Maoki time to make a statement; to interject if he had anything. He wished he did, but he could think of nothing to say. He did not know what Mr. Baynes was playing at.

"I just wanted to let everyone know that I've decided to go for the ship." He smiled, quite pleased with himself as some of the groups turned and started whispering to each other. "I just wanted everyone to know what I know so that they can choose for themselves. Anyone who wants to come with me is welcome."

He turned to leave, and his gaggle of guards began to follow, but as he reached the exit heading toward his own little wing, he turned once more to look at the frenzied arguing behind him.

"Not to worry," he said as if it were an afterthought. "For those of you who choose to stay, I'll be sure to send help to these coordinates as soon as I can."

He turned too quickly for Lieutenant Maoki to see for sure, but he knew the bastard was smiling.

Nobody was asking him what he thought. It was a bad sign and he knew it. He wished Chen and the search party would return. There was a tap on his shoulder.

"Lieutenant," the girl said in her soft voice. "What will you do? Could this ship really save us?"

The girl was young, pretty in that western way, and she always spoke so softly, but that could still be from the blood loss and fatigue. She was the Ambassador's secretary or something; Lieutenant Maoki felt bad because he always forgot her name.

"I think it is foolish to leave," he said. "We have not heard from the other bunkers and we have no idea who or what is out there."

"But you knew about the electricity," she said. He could hear the hope in her voice, as if she were expecting to hear a secret answer he had hidden. He wished he had one.

"I was in charge of investigating the disappearances," he said. "Electricity and magnetism were our last good leads. That's all I know."

She shrunk a little in her seat. He wished he had more answers.

"So, will you go?" she asked again.

Maoki hadn't even bothered to ask himself that question. What if everyone else went? What if his men wanted to go? Was there a point in staying then? Maybe he didn't like the plan because he didn't like Mr. Baynes. The bunker was a decent drive north from Beijing, so the ocean was only a hundred or so kilometers away, but he didn't like the idea of seeking out the shore.

All the glassed beach crime scenes and pictures of missing people ran through his head. Almost a million missing. What made his group any different?

The girl's expression caught his eye. He had been thinking too long.

"I don't know," he said.

It was clear that this was not the answer she'd been hoping for. How could it have been? He wanted to say something else, to cheer her. Everyone she'd come with had gone missing and now he felt he was failing her that much more.

"When will the search party be back?" she said.

He was glad she'd changed the subject.

The Lieutenant checked his watch. "They should have been here half an hour ago." He smiled. "We may need to send a search party out for the search party."

She only nodded. There was no joking in the bunker. Only Mr. Baynes smiled and when he did, most people wished he hadn't. Lieutenant Maoki wanted to leave, but he could not bring himself to leave her sitting alone surrounded by all this chaos.

"We could use a drink," Lieutenant Maoki said as he reached out his hand to the girl.

She only nodded and smiled faintly before watching her feet all the way to Maoki's room.

It was a short walk, right off the main room. The bunker hadn't had much variety in terms of food, but there was an inordinate amount of liquor. Maoki figured it was due to either officials using the bunkers for parties, or a strange, dark sense of humor by the people in charge of stocking them.

He poured them both some whiskey. He figured it was safe because it was an American drink, but when she sipped hers he could see that she was not a fan. He poured her drink in his and got her something sweeter.

"Thank you," she said.

"I keep forgetting your name." He said. "I'm terrible with names, so sorry."

She smiled a real smile, as if she wanted to laugh. Lieutenant Maoki wished he'd said it sooner. It seemed to cheer her, even if only for a minute.

"My name is Shelley," she said. "And it's all right, I'm not great with names myself, I have to use all kinds of tricks to get myself to remember."

She sipped her drink without cringing this time.

He checked his watch and swirled the whiskey in his glass and looked at it. That was what you do with whiskey, right? Or was that wine? Until the bunker, he hadn't been much of a drinker.

Shelley sat looking around the room. As if that were an easier way to get to know Maoki than talking to him.

"So what will you do?" he said at last. "Will you go to the ship or do you want to stay?"

At first, Maoki wasn't sure she'd heard, but then she looked up at him. She looked sad and confused, as if she wanted one thing, but thought she should do another.

Her face changed to a strange, faint smile. "I want to stay here and wait for Ambassador Laurence and the others. If we all leave, who will let them in?" She looked down and away before she continued, as if she were ashamed. "But if I knew they weren't coming back, that they were gone or taken or had somehow gotten home out of Mongolia, then I would go to the ship."

She looked at him in a way that scared him. She seemed to be pleading with him, begging him to tell her what to do. But the more he looked, the more he realized she wanted him to tell her they were gone, that the search party was going to keep coming back with nothing.

"I –"

No sooner had he begun than someone's private security man burst into the room.

"Lieutenant," he said. "The search party is back. They have some people with them."

There was hope on Shelley's face as she followed Lieutenant Maoki and the security man out of the room; he did not want to see her disappointed. He did not know if he could take it.

As soon as they entered the main room, Shelley rushed past him as fast as she could. She still could not run, but hustled all the same. She made a b-line for the ambassador. He smiled, but seemed very surprised by the force with which she hugged him. The older woman was with them too, her name was Ellen. Lieutenant Maoki had not forgotten her. She had talked much of her husband before she left. She had risked so much just to send him a letter.

There were no men missing from the search party, but the ambassador's group seemed somewhat diminished.

"Where is everyone?" he said to the ambassador.

The smile on Ambassador Laurence's face faded as Shelley let go and he moved toward Maoki.

"Some of your men caught rides into Russia," he said. "Most of my men stayed with me."

Lieutenant Maoki nodded and backed away to let everyone say their, "congratulations" and "welcome backs'." He was shamed by what his men had done. He had thought he could trust them. Maybe it was worse than he knew. What if the countryside was empty too? He needed to get the details from the ambassador and his men.

"Ambassador," Mr. Baynes said from the back of the crowd. "So good to see you back safely."

The crowd parted for him, grudgingly, and he came forward to shake Ambassador Laurence's hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Baynes," he said. "I'm just sorry to say we didn't find any help. The Mongolians are all moving away from the Chinese border, the army included. We were lucky to get the letters off."

"No worries," Mr. Baynes smiled that awful smile. "Apparently nobody has told you the good news."

Ambassador Laurence looked around at the crowd as if searching for expressions that he was being put on.

"Good news?" he said.

"There is a ship." Mr. Baynes raised his hand as triumphantly as he had the first time. "If we can make it to shore, it will take us home."

Ambassador Laurence seemed shocked, but it was not the kind of shock Lieutenant Maoki had hoped for from the man with the second largest security force. He seemed as pleased in his shock as almost everyone else; it was happy surprise.

“Don’t worry, Ambassador.” Mr. Baynes clapped Ambassador Laurence on the shoulder. “We’ll give you some days to rest and then we’ll make our journey to the coast.”

Ambassador Laurence still didn’t speak. For a second he just stood smiling, but then the smile faded and he turned to Lieutenant Maoki.

“How did we get the news?” When Maoki did not respond, he continued, getting more anxious as he went. “Was there a messenger? What –”

“I got a message on my secure line,” Mr. Baynes said, putting himself back in Ambassador Laurence’s eye line. “It’s an American Destroyer named Valley Forge.”

“Thank you,” Ambassador Laurence said to Mr. Baynes as he politely moved him aside and focused on Lieutenant Maoki. “But I want to know what Lieutenant Maoki thinks. He was the one who brought me here in the chaos, and he’s the one who knew about the electricity.”

Mr. Baynes rolled his eyes when Ambassador Laurence mentioned the electricity. He’d always been one of the people who thought the inconvenience was enough to make the connection untrue. Lieutenant Maoki could feel all eyes shift to him, but he did not know what to day.

“Are you going, Lieutenant?” was all Ambassador Laurence asked.

It seemed like a simple question, but Maoki could not answer it.

“I have my doubts,” he said, finally.

It was the most honest answer he could give.

Ambassador Laurence faced the crowd.

“I’m sure some of you will go to the ship, but I think we should listen to Lieutenant Maoki.” Ambassador Laurence walked to one side of the room and addressed them as an audience. “You all saw the lines, and the messages. Whoever is doing this is doing it by confusion and control of information.” Some of the men started nodding to one another. “Nobody is here because of an email or phone call.” He brought out the note that Maoki had given him outside the embassy. “Everyone was informed by hand written notes and face to face directives. We can’t trust anything we can’t hold.” He looked directly at Mr. Baynes. “No matter how secure the line is.”

Almost everyone was nodding now, except for Mr. Baynes. He still had a dim smile on his face.

“As I said,” Mr. Baynes was visibly trying not to yell. “You may all do as you like, but I’m going to the ship.” He looked at Ambassador Laurence, but much different than before.

“And since we won’t be waiting on you and your –” he regarded Ambassador Laurence’s people, “– group, I suppose we can leave tomorrow.” His unbearable smile returned. “Yes,” he said louder, so the whole room could hear. “I believe we’ll leave tomorrow.”

Lan Guang

Chairman Lan had given up asking the condition of the rest of his party. The Walkers or the little monsters, it didn’t matter who he asked, none of them would tell him. They wanted him to make some kind of video to put on the internet. They wanted the locations of the bunkers. They wanted to know so much, but they already seemed to know everything.

The door opened and two of the Walkers entered the room. He was glad it wasn’t one of the children. He hated that they could not speak, he hated how they smiled, he hated that they’d taken his country, but most of all, he hated when they laughed at him. They would smile their

big, strangely friendly smiles and shake their shoulders and heave their chests – an impersonation of a human mannerism, nothing more. One of them had told him as much. Chairman Lan wondered why they bothered.

“Chairman Lan,” one of the Walkers said. He was big, almost too big for his robes. He had a bald head and a smile like a monk who was a little dim. “The children have sent us to see if you’ve reconsidered.”

They had been asking him every day. He always refused and they always fed him and let him sleep; he wasn’t sure what they thought would motivate him to change his mind.

“The children strongly urge you to reconsider,” the smaller man said. “They said we’re to offer you your son’s life.”

Chairman Lan wasn’t sure how to respond. He’d assumed Xhou had been dead ever since they’d told him about the attack on Admiral Hosuka’s fleet.

“My son is dead.” Chairman Lan laid down on his cot. “One of the children already told me.” He smiled at the Walkers. “Have I really been in here so long they forgot?”

The two men took out their little phones and waited. They always did that when they didn’t know what to say – bunch of glorified, self-important puppets. As usual, both phones vibrated at the same time and the men read as if God himself were writing the words.

“They say to tell you that they were mistaken,” the big one said. “Lieutenant Lan Xhou was not among those taken.”

“You mean the dead,” Chairman Lan said coolly.

“The children do not kill.” The small one nearly shouted. “Their machines give eternal life.”

Chairman Lan laughed at him. They hated being laughed at – most of them anyway. Still, the big man didn’t seem bothered in the least.

“Do not be harsh with him,” The big man said to the little one. “He will know their generosity someday.”

It was like talking to robots. There was no reasoning with the Walkers. It was as if they had all memorized some twisted holy book written by these deformed little monsters they called the children.

“He is correct though.” The big man nodded towards the smaller one. “They say that your son is alive. He is adrift in a life boat heading for Japan.” He looked down to read the rest off his phone. “They have killed his motor and he will dehydrate before he reaches shore. They can save him or let him float, it’s your choice.”

Chairman Lan didn’t know if they thought he was stupid or just weak, but he was neither and he would never give them their video.

“Those are just words on a screen.” Chairman Lan sat back up on the bed. “You don’t even have any –”

The big man put the screen in front of his face mid-sentence.

He saw a man in a standard navy life boat. He was sprawled out over the edge with a bunch of clothes and loose garments as shelter from the sun. The picture was blurry so Chairman Lan could not make out a face, but the man appeared to be asleep.

Chairman Lan was about to lean back, about to laugh in their faces a second time, but the big man brushed his fingers across the screen and zoomed in on the sailor’s breast. When the pixels adjusted to the new size, Chairman Lan could read them clearly. It was his son.

“When was this taken?” he said. “How do I know it’s still him, right now? How do I know he’s not already dead?”

“The image was received just hours ago,” the big man said. “Your son will be brought to you if you make the video.”

Chairman Lan slouched back in the bed. If he made the video and it lured even one person into this trap, there would be blood on his hands. But if he didn’t, his son would die.

“If I make this video –” Chairman Lan did not even attempt to hide how shaken he was – “My son and I will be spared?”

The man smiled in that dim, monkish way.

“There is nothing to be spared from.” He said. “Your son will be brought here, refreshed, and you will be lain to eternity together. Side by side if you like.”

Chairman Lan didn’t know what laid to eternity meant, but he didn’t trust them. They were brainwashed. They sounded crazy; but regardless of how crazy they were, he had the chance to save his son.

Chairman Lan started to sob. “I’ll make the video. I’ll say whatever they want. Just bring my son here.”

The big man put his hand on Chairman Lan’s shoulder, and he wanted to grab it and twist it behind his back; twist it and hyperextend the elbow, make him kiss the floor. Hosuka would have done it. This dim little monkey had no right to touch him. Empathy was gone from the Walkers. They were soulless husks of men who did as they were told.

“Don’t touch me.” Chairman Lan stifled his sobs to put the bass back in his voice. “Get the camera before I change my mind.”

The man flashed a brief smile before turning and walking out of the room. No bow, no farewell. None of them bowed anymore, just like the little monsters. They just stalked everywhere, silent and strange.

Chairman Lan was glad when the door shut behind them. He had preferred solitude to any of the available company for the last month or so.

He just hoped that none of the children came in for the taping of the video. He didn’t know if he could do it with them in the room. He couldn’t explain it, but he always felt as if they were staring at him, studying him – as if he were a monkey in a cage. That had no eyes made the feeling even stranger.

He had read reports and Dr. Kitsuno had shared some of his findings. He hadn’t really looked at much of it himself until they actually found a body, but none of it could have prepared him for seeing one of them alive, walking around. It was like being in a horror movie when the monster is revealed, but it wasn’t just the first time; it was like that every time he saw them. The feeling never went away.

The big Walker entered the room so silently that when Chairman Lan heard the tripod snap into place he nearly jumped.

“We are ready.” The big man handed Chairman Lan some papers. “This is your statement.”

“How kind of you.” Chairman Lan said icily. The big man smiled as if he’d been complimented

Chairman Lan skimmed the papers:

*Hello, my name is Chairman Lan Guang..... new
technology..... cure all..... all welcome, no passports
needed.....*

It was absurd. He couldn't shame himself by reading something this awful.

"This sounds ridiculous," Chairman Lan said. "Nobody will ever believe this. It sounds completely suspicious." He laughed at the big man and tossed the papers back at him. "Don't you know that nobody trusts Communists anyway?"

The big man finally looked something other than content and that made the Chairman happy.

"This is what the children have prepared – "

"It looks like a bunch of children prepared it." Chairman Lan smiled as the big man turned red. "If a child wrote this garbage on an exam, he would not make the next grade."

The big man looked as if he would burst at any moment, but then he calmed and his not-so-bright smile returned.

"I'm sorry to hear that," the big man said. "But not as sorry as your son will be."

Chairman Lan had hoped he'd say that.

"Don't worry." Chairman Lan tried to copy the man's smile. "I'll read this unintelligible scribbling." Chairman Lan bowed sarcastically low. "As soon as my son is here."

"That was not the deal," the big man was flustered. "The video, then –"

"How do I know I'll see him once the video is made?" Chairman Lan said. "I have no way to make sure your end is met other than to see my son first."

The man seemed confused.

"The children have promised you your son." He seemed to be puzzling something out. "So you will get him."

The big man's unending trust in the little creatures was startling and comical all at once. Chairman Lan had seen many religious men question their deities more than he'd seen these Walkers question their grotesque little masters.

"Silly me." Chairman Lan threw his hands in the air. "I forgot the email I got months ago that said they would take over our country."

"Your country," the big man said as his face got red.

He put his chin in the air and stalked out of the room. Chairman Lan smiled bigger than he had in a long time. It was exasperating how the Walkers worshipped those little monsters.

Almost immediately, the smile faded. What if the big man brought the children in to convince him? What if they took the deal off the table? What if Chairman Lan had just killed his son?

Hours went by; Chairman Lan wasn't sure how many. He wanted word of his son. After a while, he longed for even one of the children to come in. He was prepared to beg, to get on his knees and shame himself at their terrible little feet. He tried to sleep but could barely close his eyes. He feared what he would dream if he did; so he just lay with his back to the door.

When the door finally squeaked open, he did not want to turn around. He had convinced himself that they would tell him his son was dead because of his refusal to cooperate, and he would sooner be thought to be asleep than hear those words.

"Father," a raspy voice said. "Father, are you awake?"

It hardly sounded like Xhou, but it was close enough that Chairman Lan had to look. Rolling over seemed to take minutes, and every inch he turned, he was more and more afraid that it would not be his son, but only a cruel joke.

When he finally met his son's gaze, he found that the expression he saw matched his own shock, disbelief, and excitement. He quickly hugged his son. He could still smell the sea on him and feel the weakness in his legs.

"Walkers," Chairman Lan shouted. Both the big and small one entered the room. "My son needs food and water. He is famished and dehydrated."

They smiled and walked from the room. They were strange smiles, as if they had actually been happy that the Chairman had been happy. Just when he thought he had them figured out, something like that would happen and he'd have to start all over. The world didn't make sense anymore.

Chairman Lan helped his son over to the bed to sit down.

"Are you all right?" Chairman Lan said. "Did they do anything to you?"

Xhou just shook his head and looked down at his own shaking hands. He seemed as though he wanted to say something, but he didn't have the words.

"How did they get you here so quickly?"

"It was strange," Xhou said. "One second I was cooking on the raft –" Xhou looked toward the door, but he didn't seem to be looking at it. It was as if he was watching a movie that Chairman Lan could not see. "– and the next, there was this strange metal sphere that breached and almost flipped me."

"Who was inside?" Chairman Lan said softly. When he saw the look on Xhou's face, he rephrased. "What was inside?"

When Zhou looked up, Chairman Lan saw a fear he hadn't seen in his son since he was nine years old and running from a Hummingbird because he thought its beak was a stinger.

"It was dark inside," Xhou said. "But I could still see pretty well. It was small and didn't have any eyes. It was black; even in the shadows I could tell it was black. And it never spoke." Xhou looked up at his father. "It just pointed to a seat and I sat and some straps locked me in." Xhou looked back at the door. "When it started moving I almost threw up. It moved so fast."

Chairman Lan put his hand on his son's shoulder and pulled him closer. He couldn't think of anything to say.

Suddenly, Xhou drew back from the embrace and began wiping his eyes. When he was done, he didn't look like a scared boy anymore, and when the salute came, the Chairman saw a soldier.

"The fleet was destroyed, father," Xhou said with sadness in his eyes but nowhere else on his face. "Or captured. I cannot be sure. Admiral Hosuka ordered me to abandon before the outcome was decided."

As soon as he delivered the news, all of the strength he'd used to deliver it so forcefully seemed to dissipate quickly, and he was soon hunched and regarding his shaking hands again.

"How did it happen?" Chairman Lan regretted asking as soon as he said it.

"First, the sub disappeared." Xhou's eyes never left his hands. "Then the radar and sonar went off, and the radios went down." Xhou finally looked up at the Chairman. "Then our own ships encircled us." Xhou seemed to be explaining and looking for answers all at once, but Chairman Lan had few to give him. "The decks were full of little shadows, but they never fired at us." Horror mixed with the confusion already on Xhou's face. "Jets came flying at us from the carriers, but nobody was flying them." His voice dropped to a whisper, either from weakness or fear. "They just tumbled end over end through the air, as if someone or something had thrown them. When one of them breached the hull, Admiral Hosuka ordered me to abandon ship and get the message to you."

Chairman Lan pulled him to his side once again. He wanted to tell him everything he knew, to try and explain some of what he'd seen, but this wasn't the time.

"Where is mother?" Xhou said after minutes of silence.

"She is safe." Chairman Lan said. "She extended her vacation in Greece with your aunt."

He could feel Xhou nod in relief against his shoulder. He didn't know whether to tell him that he'd actually told his wife to extend her stay; that he'd known the country was becoming unstable; that he'd known at least some of the perils facing his country even before sending the fleet. He knew his son had an affection for Hosuka, perhaps more than the Chairman himself. He didn't know if his son would blame him for the Admiral's fate.

The Walkers entered the room and set up two trays in front of Chairman Lan and his son. They had water, bread, cheese, and an apple. Chairman Lan nodded at them as they smiled and exited the room.

Xhou attacked his food. He finished his water almost instantly so Chairman Lan refilled it with his own glass. Almost as soon as he'd finished eating, Xhou lay down on the Chairman's bed and fell asleep.

Chairman Lan watched him for a while. Even Xhou's sleep didn't seem peaceful. The children were the stuff of nightmares. Just having seen them, Chairman Lan had come to abhor sleep and avoid it whenever possible, but he could not imagine the things in Xhou's dreams.

Chairman Lan turned when the door creaked to see the big Walker enter the room as if intruding upon a sleeping baby.

"We will take you to make the video now." The big man said quietly from the doorway.

Chairman Lan went to the doorway so as not to wake his son.

"He is so tired." Chairman Lan motioned toward his son. "If we could just let him sleep a little longer—"

"Your son is here. He will be here when we return." The man's tone seemed non-negotiable. "The children are growing impatient."

Chairman Lan looked at his son for some time. He did not want to leave him. They had kept their word thus far, but once the video was made, they wouldn't need him anymore. Chairman Lan shook Xhou's shoulder until he opened his eyes.

"I will be back," Chairman Lan said. "I have to go do something. You rest; we can talk more when I get back."

Xhou nodded and was back asleep so fast that Chairman Lan wondered if he'd heard him at all. Every step, the Chairman wished he'd brought his son; he had no way of knowing that he would be there when they got back. The Walker stayed in front of him, clearly agitated by the slow pace.

Outside, the air itself felt different. Thick in a strange way. When the Chairman opened the door to the SUV, he got a static shock and the Walker smiled to the point of almost laughing when the Chairman jumped.

They took the car to his old office building. Every now and then, as they drove, Chairman Lan saw strange glints and gleams out of the corner of his eye. One caught his eye as the SUV stopped. It was a very shiny metal pole that stood about three stories high and seemed whisper thin from his distance. There were many of them. Whichever direction he looked, he saw at least one or two. It was as if they'd replaced the power lines. Every now and then he saw lightning leap between them. It reminded him of a Tesla coil he'd seen once. They were amazing in the most terrible way, and it mad Chairman Lan afraid in a way he was completely unprepared for. It was as if each pole sprouting lightning was a flag stuck deep in the soil of his country; saying

that it really wasn't his anymore, and the more poles he saw, the more Chairman Lan feared it never would be again.

When they got there, one of the children was waiting on the front steps. Chairman Lan cringed when he saw it and didn't want look up again for the rest of the trip.

The lights were all off when they entered, but they turned on as the little monster got close to them. At the elevator, it put its hand on the button panel and the door opened. Then, it did the same thing on the inside and the correct floor button lit up and the elevator started moving. The Chairman was thankful when it got out of the elevator and just stood by it as they walked away, waiting for them to return. He didn't know how he would have handled that thing being around any longer than it had to.

Chairman Lan felt strange when he walked into his office. It was so oddly unchanged and unused. He had become so used to his small bed in his tiny room that he felt crushed by the enormity of his old office. It didn't feel like it was his anymore.

Nobody had dusted or swept in months. It was as if a coat of drear had settled over everything; even once the windows were opened, the sunlight only seemed to exaggerate the extent to which everything had lost its luster.

As the Walkers were setting up the cameras and the lights, he thought about what he was doing. He was potentially luring millions of people into a trap. Suddenly, he felt stupid for pointing out how poorly written the speech was. The less convincing, the better.

When they finally sat him down at his desk, the isolation almost crushed him. It was as if this space, his office, were crushing him, falling in on him. He felt as though he were in the little chair instead of his desk. He wished he were bolder. He wished he could thrive in that isolation like Admiral Hosuka, or even that arrogant General Chun.

When the lights came on, and the red recording light on the camera started flashing, he went somewhere else in his mind. He had to do it, but he couldn't be a part of it. Everything seemed to go by so fast, and he didn't really pay attention to the words he was reading.

He was glad when the Walkers started packing everything up. Chairman Lan felt a little lightheaded upon rising, and the small Walker almost had to catch him as he staggered toward the door. The elevator and the child were waiting for them in the same spot they'd left them. Only now, the child had one of those disturbing smiles on its face, menacing and thankful all at once.

The lights turned off as they exited in the same way they'd turned on when they'd entered. This time, when they got in the car, the little creature got in with them. It sat in the front with the big Walker and the smaller one sat in the back with the Chairman.

The diminutive creature just sat in the passenger seat, completely still. After a couple blocks, it seemed as if it were just part of the black leather seat it sat in. It was so eerie to watch them stand around, never breathing, never blinking. It was as if they weren't really alive.

Halfway back to the facility, it started moving. At intersections, it looked both ways, as if it were checking for traffic with the eyes it did not have. Chairman Lan looked at the driver; he seemed terribly startled. He always waited for it to nod before he made a move.

After a couple blocks, they stopped to turn at another intersection, but this time it didn't look both ways, only left. When Chairman Lan leaned forward to see, the little Walker beside him held him back.

Chairman Lan heard the car before it came into view. It was a big, black SUV almost identical to theirs, and it was heading right for them and didn't look as though it was going to

stop. As it descended the hill, Chairman Lan could see that there were two more black SUVs behind it.

When the SUV was about a block away, the child put both of its hands up. Their car turned off and all of the doors opened.

“Out,” the big man said. “Follow the child.”

Chairman Lan glanced back and saw a bunch of men in suits getting out of the other vehicles. They were talking, but he could not understand exactly what they were saying. It didn’t sound like Chinese.

He hurried after the child and the Walkers waiting for him. The Chairman felt that it was odd that they would wait at all, but that thought left his mind when he looked back and saw the swarm of men in suits coming down the hill.

They turned down an alley. Chairman Lan’s heart nearly stopped when he saw that there was an aluminum fence in the middle. He would never make it over, his service days were long behind him and he hadn’t scaled anything but restaurant steps for many years. But no sooner had he thought that than the child raised its hand and the fence tore away from the bricks. It seemed to float above their heads, and once they had passed underneath, the child raised its other hand and the fence went hurtling down the alley as if it were welded to the front of an invisible car. Sparks flew from all sides.

There was a loud crash and Chairman Lan looked back just before turning out of the alley. The fence was lying on a heap of men in suits. He may have smiled, but almost as soon as they rounded the next corner, the Walker in front of him stopped and Chairman Lan slammed into his back, nearly knocking himself to the ground.

“Stop,” a forceful voice said. “Identify yourselves.”

Chairman Lan peeked over the Walker’s shoulder. Three men were advancing, guns drawn, a pack of at least ten other men in suits behind them.

When the men were about twenty feet away, the child stepped out from behind the big Walker. The men stopped in their tracks. Chairman Lan wondered if he looked that afraid the first time he’d seen one.

When it started walking toward them, they backed up. They kept backing up, giving no order to stop. They were speechless.

Without any warning, the man in front fired, but he dropped almost as soon as the sound was heard. There was a hole right under his eye. Chairman Lan thought the gun had malfunctioned until the others opened fire as well. Bullets went everywhere except at the little figure effortlessly walking towards the swarm of suits.

The whole group was backing up, but they kept firing and reloading and firing some more.

When it put its left hand up to the side, they all looked in that direction, but it was only a wall. It stopped walking and looked back at Chairman Lan and the Walkers. It smiled one of the most terrible, playful smiles Chairman Lan had ever seen. Then, a car flew in from nowhere and crushed the men in suits against the wall.

Chairman Lan felt as though he were watching a movie, as if none of it could be real, but then he saw the small figure slump and fall to one knee. The big Walker ran and scooped it up in his arms.

“It is very weak,” he said in between breaths. “It used most of its energy.” He started hurrying away, then turned and waved for the others to follow. “Come, we must hurry back. It needs rest.”

Before they had gone twenty feet, the men that had been hit by the fence emerged from the alley. They yelled for Chairman Lan and the Walkers to stop a few times, but the Walkers just kept going. After they passed the mangled stack of men under the car, the new swarm of men in suits started firing.

Chairman Lan followed the Walkers, doing his best to keep up, but he didn't even make it a block before he fell. Chairman Lan tried to pick himself up, tried to will himself forward, but he was too weak and dizzy. He wished he was a stronger, bolder man. The Walkers came back and tried to help, but the men in suits were closing in.

The child held out its arm and the bullets bounced everywhere. A couple times, the Chairman could see them change directions and bend around them. It was amazing, but the bullets kept getting closer. Their protective bubble was shrinking with each centimeter the child's arm dropped.

Once the men in suits were close, the big Walker set the child down beside Chairman Lan and he and the small Walker charged the men in suits with their bare fists. They didn't get very far. The bullets seemed to be almost hitting them now before they turned. Chairman Lan looked over at the child. It was not smiling, but had a look of deep sadness. It was as if it were apologizing, as if it sincerely wished it had been able to save them all.

Then, it looked away from Chairman Lan and towards the advancing wall of men in suits. It seemed to summon all of its energy to fling both of its arms to the right. After that, it fell limp, but the gunfire had stopped. When he looked up, none of the men had guns, and they all appeared very confused.

One man stepped forward.

"Identify yourself." He sounded scared but very serious. "What was that thing?"

Chairman Lan couldn't get the image of the child's face out of his head. He couldn't respond. But when they began to pick him up, he found his wits.

"My name is Chairman Lan Guang of what was, until eighteen months ago, known as The People's Republic of China." The man seemed shocked and confused.

He dropped his eyes again to the unconscious little thing beside him as he mindlessly handed over his identification

The men in suits helped Chairman Lan to his feet, but he still looked only at the child.

"Mr. Chairman," the man said. "My name is Mr. Baynes and I believe I can be of service to you. There is a United States destroyer by the name of Valley Forge which I and my men will be meeting in just a few days, and it is to take us to safety."

Chairman Lan nodded and weakly motioned for some of the men to take their hands off him. When he motioned for them to carry the child as well, none of them would touch it so he bent and picked it up himself.

"What is that thing?" Mr. Baynes said.

Chairman Lan looked down at its face and remembered how it had looked at him. The children had, yet again, completely baffled him.

"I don't know." Chairman Lan said.

Mr. Poole

He slept for most of the fourteen hour flight from LAX to a remote military installation in Mongolia, southwest of Sainshand. He could not do the same now, bouncing around in the front

seat of the Humvee and small troop transport truck that had been waiting for them. It wasn't a long ride into China, but the roads were poor so it seemed like it.

It had been a huge hassle getting Director Russell and Deputy Director Hastings to sign off on Mr. Bucks' presence, but, at the end of the day, they were just bureaucrats who wanted the papers off their desks. Mr. Poole hadn't been crazy about leaving the defense of the nation to paper-pushers, but more information was needed. Information was power and he intended to have more information than either of them.

Mr. Poole especially disliked Deputy Director Hastings. Hastings was always talking down to him and lording his power. Mr. Poole would like nothing more than to come back with such a successful report that he would be removed from Hastings' power and left to his own devices directly under Director Russell; that would wipe the smug smile and condescension right out of that bastard Hastings.

Mr. Bucks was in the back seat. From what Mr. Poole could tell, he hadn't slept the entire flight, nor had he spoken except to get food and drinks. Mr. Poole didn't know what to make of it, and that bothered him. Mr. Poole had no wife and children; he barely had any family at all. He had no idea what was going on in Mr. Bucks' head. He seemed broken and determined all at once and, in the eyes of Mr. Poole, that made him an undefined variable – the worst kind.

"We'll be crossing the border in twelve clicks, sir," Captain Rosby said.

"Thank you, Captain," Mr. Poole said. "We'll see how it looks at five clicks and decide our next move then."

Captain Rosby nodded, never taking his eyes off the road. Mr. Poole had selected Captain Rosby from a very short list of Army Rangers. By all accounts, the man was a physical freak in his prime. He still held a majority of the strength and endurance records, not to mention his forty eight verified kills, which was unheard of for anyone who wasn't a sniper, but that was more than a couple years ago. Rosby had a little gray in his hair now, not that any of the other men in the unit would ever care to test him. He was a legend to them, and had been selected for just that reason.

It wasn't hard to find a Ranger team that wanted to fight aliens, especially after the tests at the lab in Florida. That cadaver had yielded a lot of helpful information. Most of which was, at the moment, non-consequential to Mr. Poole, but the bit about their reliance on and use of electricity as both a means of locomotion and as a weapon was extremely helpful.

His team wore camouflaged rubber suits, carried plastic side arms, and polyurethane field knives, and some neat little gadgets developed by Dr. Bryce, most of which utilizing electromagnetic pulses. They had EMP rifles, grenades, and some sentry devices to plant around their convoy at night.

Mr. Poole wore the rubber gear as well, but he missed his custom Italian suits and assortment of power ties. In this combat attire, he felt out of place. It had been years since his field days and the desk work was evident in the silhouette of his skin-tight camo suit.

He kept flipping through the autopsy photos from the lab in Florida. Mr. Poole had never seen one of the things for himself, but after a couple days of looking at the pictures, he wasn't sure he wanted to. They looked like something straight out of a horror film: small, black, burned, shriveled, and eerily proportioned like children. Thinking about it made Mr. Poole shudder. He was glad he had his wall of rubber-clad Rangers around.

When they landed, they had gotten intel from the few people still around the base. Stories ranged from cars being turned off to these things actually shooting lightning from their fingertips. Most of it sounded like rumor and voodoo, but it was all they had to go on so, for the

time, they'd formed their tactics and maneuvers around these stories. They assumed lightning, flying, fire, and brimstone, and they were ready for all of it.

"Five clicks, Sir," Captain Rosby said. "What should we do?"

Trees were on either side of the road and the cover was relatively thick. Mr. Poole didn't know if he exactly hoped some of those little monsters were waiting in there, but he wasn't really against the idea either.

"Tell them to keep their eyes on the read-outs," Mr. Poole said. "Keep going."

Captain Rosby gave the rear truck the order and turned his radio off again before he heard the affirmation.

Just like everyone else, Mr. Bucks had a rubber camo suit on, but he looked exceedingly silly in his, more so even than Mr. Poole. He was almost fifty and not in the best shape; the skin-tight suit was not kind to him. Mr. Bucks was still sitting in the back, eyes, as always, on his interlaced fingers; sometimes he held the letter, this time it was just the fingers. He didn't even react when the read-outs were mentioned. He either wasn't scared about his first encounter with a non-human sentient being, or he didn't care.

Mr. Poole had seen Captain Rosby talking to Mr. Bucks on the plane. They had seemed to get along. Rosby's wife had left him and he rarely saw his children. Maybe they'd bonded over loss. Either way, it had been bothering Mr. Poole ever since Captain Rosby had refused to share the conversation with him. All he had said was, "It's private." Mr. Poole didn't like it.

"People in the road, Sir," Captain Rosby said without slowing down. "What should we do?"

It was a group of no more than twenty, but Mr. Poole decided they had to stop when the people saw the convoy and started running for the trees.

"Tell everyone to stop," Mr. Poole said. "Get in the woods and find those people."

Before Mr. Poole had even finished, Captain Rosby was out of the car, moving toward the tree line with the younger men hurrying to catch up.

Mr. Bucks didn't move at all. It was as if he didn't even notice the vehicle had stopped. He was starting to get on Mr. Poole's nerves, always moping, focusing, or whatever the hell he was doing. It wouldn't be so bad if he at least knew which it was. The worst part was, Mr. Poole was excited to be here, to be the first to meet another race on the battlefield, but Mr. Bucks' lack of enthusiasm was finding a way to ruin the entire experience.

The Rangers were not gone long. The group they brought back looked worn and dirty, as if they hadn't seen civilization for a while.

"Do any of you speak English?" Mr. Poole said. "We mean you no harm; we are just here to —"

A man in the middle raised his hand.

"I speak all right," the man said. "My name is Ming Han." He looked around and seemed afraid to say anything more, but gathered himself. "Who are you people?"

Mr. Poole pulled his mask off, lowered his hood, and took one clean stroke through his hair.

"My name is Mr. Poole." He walked forward to shake the man's hand. "And this giant man is Captain Rosby of Team Spartan." He knew Rosby wasn't impressed because he disliked the playful names his Rangers had given to the teams, but his face didn't show it. "He is in charge of the rest of the men you see."

Mr. Ming did not laugh, the humor must have been lost on his basic knowledge of the language, but he did seem to at least understand that they were a military unit.

“We are American,” Mr. Poole said in answer to the question Mr. Ming was clearly trying to put into words. Mr. Ming smiled thankfully and began formulating the words for another question.

The door to the Humvee slammed loudly, but before Mr. Poole could turn around to see what it was, he was knocked to the ground by a very frenzied Mr. Bucks.

“Have you seen her?” Mr. Bucks was holding the picture of his wife up to the group. “Or her?” He had a picture of his daughter too.

The travelers seemed frightened by his hysteria. Mr. Poole, on the other hand, was upset that Mr. Bucks had been able to knock him down without any of the Rangers moving to intercept him. As he was getting up, he thought he glanced a smile on Captain Rosby’s face, but he dismissed it as a figment of his imagination. By all accounts, Captain Rosby had stopped smiling years ago.

Mr. Ming was looking around Mr. Bucks to Mr. Poole. His eyes were pleading for the mad man to be pulled away.

“Mr. Bucks, please return to the vehicle.” When he turned to Mr. Poole, he seemed completely confused and a little hurt. “There are 1.3 billion Chinese, and this lot is almost in Mongolia. They have not seen your wife and you appear to be scaring them.”

He did not listen. He just shouldered his way through the crowd showing the picture to all of them. Mr. Poole froze for an instant; he hadn’t been disobeyed so outright in a very long time. It reminded him why he disliked civilians.

“Captain Rosby, please show Mr. Bucks back to the vehicle,” Mr. Poole said. “It appears he is having a hard time hearing through the rubber hood.”

Captain Rosby did as he was told, but he didn’t seem very pleased about it, and he didn’t grab Mr. Bucks by the arm and make him mind as Mr. Poole had hoped. Instead, he gently grabbed his shoulder and spoke to him quietly.

Mr. Bucks shot a cold glance over at Mr. Poole and stomped back to the Humvee, most likely to sit in his hunched position and stare at his hands some more.

“Sorry about that.” Mr. Poole said, bowing to Mr. Ming. “We are here to remove the entity that has taken over your country before it spreads to ours.”

Mr. Ming’s eyes got very wide, but Mr. Poole could not tell if he was grateful, impressed, or afraid. He looked around, seeming to just notice the strange attire of the Rangers.

“What do you know about the children?” Mr. Ming said. “We know much. Could tell you, maybe help.”

Mr. Ming seemed to have a sudden inspiration and looked through his crowd of followers, eventually motioning for a man to come forward. The man was shorter than Mr. Ming, but thicker and looked athletic. He wore a soldier’s uniform.

“Sorry to say, we haven’t seen any missing children,” Mr. Poole said. “Who is this man?”

“I think you misunderstand, Mr. Poole.” Mr. Ming motioned to the back of the troop transport truck. “We can talk alone? The three of us?”

Mr. Poole wasn’t sure why the man wanted to speak in private, but he didn’t see the harm in it. He hoped the information would be worth the time.

Before they entered the back of the truck, Mr. Poole had the sensors and other machines covered and placed in the corner. He didn’t know anything about these people other than that they were dirty and tired. He couldn’t have them seeing classified technology.

One of the Rangers lifted the flap, and the three of them were about to step in when Mr. Bucks came panting around the corner with Captain Rosby walking a distance behind.

"I'm coming with you, Poole." Mr. Bucks said. "I know what you know. That was the deal."

He was right, but Mr. Poole didn't want him in there. He didn't want him asking stupid questions about his wife and daughter. He glanced at Captain Rosby who stood to the side of the truck, looking down the road, clearly trying not to be noticed. *He told Bucks. He brought him to the meeting.*

"Must have slipped my mind." Mr. Poole said dryly. "Captain Rosby," Mr. Poole looked at the Captain out of the corner of his eye. "Why don't you give Mr. Bucks a leg up?"

Captain Rosby nodded as if he were oblivious to the tone and gave Mr. Bucks a boost into the truck.

Mr. Ming and the quiet man took their seats on one side of the truck, but Mr. Poole took Ron aside for a moment.

"You will only observe, Mr. Bucks." Mr. Poole said, making sure to hold Ron's gaze. "You will not speak. Is that clear?"

Ron nodded and brushed past Mr. Poole to make his seat.

"So why the privacy, Mr. Ming?" Mr. Poole said. "Do you not trust my men?"

"That is not the case." Mr. Ming said. "I just didn't want to scare them. Also didn't want to scare the women and children." Mr. Ming leaned in close. "Me and the other men have kept much from them, for their own good."

Mr. Poole was intrigued. Mr. Ming did not appear frenzied or fanatical. He did not appear to be preparing to fabricate a story or tell a campfire tale. He seemed genuinely disturbed by the knowledge he was about to share.

"I'm listening, Mr. Ming."

"When I mentioned children outside, I was not speaking of human children." Mr. Ming said. "It is the name that has been given to the little creatures." The man beside Mr. Ming looked uncomfortable and scooted closer to him. "They are little and black with no eyes or ears –"

"Thank you for the name clarification." Mr. Poole wanted Mr. Ming to get to the point. "But I have pictures of them." Mr. Poole held up the manila envelope with the autopsy photos in it. "I'm interested in what they do, how they do it, and anything you can tell me about them that we cannot get from examining the bodies alone."

He appeared insulted and shocked. For a second, Mr. Poole feared that the talk had been a waste of time, that this man had nothing new to tell him.

"They are electric." Mr. Ming said without looking up. "The control anything metal or electric. They can turn cars off or shoot lightning straight from their hands." Mr. Ming looked hard at Mr. Poole. "I've seen them do it."

"We have heard such stories," Mr. Poole said. "I'm glad to have them –"

Mr. Poole was rising to leave, but Mr. Ming grabbed his arm and pulled him back down.

"They have human helpers." He said frantically. "They are called Walkers and they cannot be trusted. They wear robes and worship the children like gods."

None of this really mattered to Mr. Poole. The existence of human allies was interesting, but of no real consequence. Mr. Poole nodded thanks and stood to leave.

"They have machines," Mr. Ming said as he grabbed the silent man beside him. "Tell him about the machine, Kai."

The man in the back that had been so quiet seemed utterly terrified to have all eyes on him. He looked as scared as a child in his first play. Mr. Poole sat back down.

“What type of machines?” Mr. Poole inched closer to the man, but he scooted away twice as far. “What is this man’s name?” Mr. Poole said to Mr. Ming.

“His name is Chun Kai,” Mr. Ming said. “And he is the only one who can tell you about the machines.”

“His story is uncorroborated then?” Mr. Poole rolled his eyes.

“No,” Mr. Ming grabbed his arm again. “All of the men have seen the machines.” He put his hand on Chun Kai’s back. “But Chun Kai is the only person to have been inside one.”

Chun Kai still seemed frightened of Mr. Poole, but after some nodding and smiling by Mr. Ming, he moved forward and sat like a child in the principal’s office; slouched forward, hands on his knees, and his eyes on the floor.

“I remember small things,” he said. “Just bits and pieces. The first thing I remember is my mother feeding me rice in a small wooden chair.” He glanced up at Mr. Poole. “It was like I was living in fast forward, only really being in the parts I remember.”

“He was disoriented when I woke him,” Mr. Ming said. “He had no idea who I was, where he was, or even what year it was.”

“The last thing I remember before he woke me up –” Chun Kai seemed near tears. “ – Was playing soldier with Ko in the village.” He looked at his hands, opening and closing them, studying them as if there would be a test. “I was just eleven.” He looked back and forth between Mr. Ming and Mr. Poole. “Then a flash of light and a minute of darkness and I’m this.” He shook his hands in front of his face, but Mr. Ming moved to calm him.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Poole,” Mr. Ming said. “More comes back to him every day, but, for the most part, he is still much like a child.”

Mr. Poole only nodded.

“Let me go.” Chun Kai was flailing wildly and Mr. Ming was struggling to contain him.

“Captain,” Mr. Poole called and the flap opened immediately. “Take this man back to the others.”

Mr. Ming nodded thanks. “Go sit with Chan and Kung,” Mr. Ming said.

The man-child nodded without looking back and went quietly from the truck.

“Where did you find him?” Mr. Poole said. “What do these machines look like?”

“They are inside the Great Wall,” Mr. Ming said. “They are all there, all those taken. We are sure of it. They –”

“Hold on,” Mr. Poole said. “What do you mean all? And why did you only –”

Mr. Ming stood – he looked as though if he stopped his story, he would not start again, as if he had been waiting for some time to tell someone he thought could save them.

“Almost one million people by the last count of the missing, sir,” Mr. Ming said. “There are probably many more at this point, millions, maybe hundreds of millions.” Mr. Ming glanced at Mr. Bucks who seemed interested to the point of bursting. “And I didn’t try to awaken anyone after Chun Kai because, when I did, he almost died.”

Mr. Poole tried not to appear at a loss for words, but, judging by the look on Mr. Ming’s face, he failed. Mr. Ming looked apprehensive and withdrawn, as if Mr. Poole’s reaction had made him reconsider his next bit of information.

“What about the machines?” Mr. Bucks had nearly jumped from his seat. “Do you have one?”

Mr. Poole was about to remind Mr. Bucks of his rule of silence, but it was a good question. These machines intrigued him. That Chun Kai had gone in a trained soldier and come out a boy whose manhood eluded him. What was the point of such a machine?

Mr. Ming seemed to be waiting for Mr. Poole's approval to answer the question.

"Well, Mr. Ming, do you have one?" Mr. Poole said.

"I think you misunderstand." Mr. Ming seemed confused. "Chun Kai was in the machine. It is big, like a bed with a clear cover that went over his face." Mr. Ming seemed to be recalling the incident in his mind. His hands mimed imagined actions. "There were wires coming from the head covering." His hands jerked and went immediately to his knees. "I cut them, and then Chun Kai stopped breathing. I had to revive him."

Mr. Bucks moved as if he were about to ask another question, but Mr. Poole signaled for him to stay seated.

"Thank you, Mr. Ming." Mr. Poole said. "You have been very helpful. If you can tell me where my men and I can find this bank of machines, you may be on your way."

"A village called Laoniuwan." Ming Han said. "It's to the southeast, where the Great Wall meets the Yellow River." Mr. Poole shook Mr. Ming's hand and turned to leave, but Mr. Ming grabbed his shoulder. "They are inside the wall. You can enter by the river where the wall goes in. It's all metal inside and –"

"Thank you, Mr. Ming," Mr. Poole said. He was starting to ramble and he had a look in his eye as if he were reliving it all over again. It was unnecessary and Mr. Poole had a schedule to keep.

Mr. Poole grabbed Mr. Ming's shoulder and ushered him out of the truck. Mr. Poole followed with Mr. Bucks right behind him.

"Captain, give these people some rations and send them on their way." Mr. Poole motioned for the Captain to come closer. "And send a couple men with them." Captain Rosby nodded and turned to leave, but Mr. Poole grabbed his shoulder. "They are to detain Mr. Ming and that man named Chun Kai and wait for us back at the forward base. The mission has changed."

Captain Rosby's face was as stony as ever, but his hesitation betrayed his confusion about the orders. Whatever his feelings, he was a good soldier, as always, and relayed the orders. Captain Rosby selected the men for the security detail himself.

Mr. Poole bid a final farewell to Mr. Ming and his group before loading up in the trucks and starting off down the road. Once they'd been going a while, Captain Rosby finally asked the question Mr. Poole knew had been burning a hole in his lips since the orders were given.

"So what is the new mission, sir?" Captain Rosby tried to seem as if he were only asking on a need to know basis.

"Mr. Ming and that Chun Kai character were talking about some strange technology." He searched Captain Rosby's face for some sense of what he thought about this, but came up with nothing. "We are going to acquire one of these units and bring it to headquarters for analysis."

Captain Rosby nodded, completely focused on the road. Mr. Bucks seemed about to speak but was silenced by the blaring of Rosby's radio.

"Sir, Captain Rosby, sir," the Ranger's voice was almost silenced by interference. "The readouts, they –"

The radio cut out and turned off.

"Stop the truck, Captain." Mr. Poole said. "Form the men up around the convoy. It's time to field test those suits."

Ellen

Ellen sat silently in the common area with a couple of the Ambassador's security guards. It had been almost a week since Lieutenant Maoki had trapped everyone else in the bunker. Ellen kept playing it back in her head. She had been in the security room with Shelly and a couple of Ambassador Laurence's security men. Everything had seemed fine until the Lieutenant and his men came running into view of the camera by the main entrance. They had been out on a supply run, but they didn't have anything but their rifles in their hands.

The security guard hit the button to open the gate, but Lieutenant Maoki stopped it and closed it again.

He ran to the intercom, "Don't open it."

Most of the memory was like a silent movie that played in her mind whenever it had the chance to wander. The Lieutenant was giving orders. The men lined the walls in the hall leading to the door with their grenades. Some packed plastic explosives against support beams. Before he blew the charges, he pushed the intercom button again.

"We will be back if we can." He said. "Do not open this door for anyone else." He started to walk away, but turned around and pressed the button again. "Especially the men in robes."

He nodded to the camera before walking away. His men followed. After a couple seconds there was a brief, bright flash. Then the camera was just fuzz.

Who was out there, is out there? No, what is out there? After it happened, Ellen had gone with a lot of the other people in the bunker to hide in the vault room for almost three days. Everyone was scared, everyone except Ambassador Laurence who had stayed outside with his security.

The population of the bunker had been pretty quiet since it all happened.

Shelly had been especially quiet. Ellen was pretty sure Shelly had taken a liking to the Lieutenant and was worried about him. The whole thing seemed to make the Ambassador anxious, but Ellen didn't know if it was due to Shelly's distress or his newfound role as the man in charge.

Ellen was glad that the Ambassador was in charge, but she did think it was a little odd that all of the Chinese men had chosen an American instead of one of their own. Ellen wasn't a racist or anything, she just knew that if this were America, and they were in an American government bunker, a foreigner never would have been put in charge, maybe it was because he hadn't hidden in the vault room with everyone else. Ambassador Laurence seemed to feel the same, but he hadn't let it bother him for long.

He had continued all of Lieutenant Maoki's rules, especially the ones involving electronics. He had also decided to share a lot of the security responsibilities amongst the different groups. Everyone seemed happy with the arrangement.

Ellen was snapped from her daydream when Ambassador Laurence marched through the door.

"Some privacy please." He never stopped walking, never even paused. "Ellen." He gently grabbed her shoulder. "I would like to talk to you if you don't mind." He sat on the couch on the far side of the room, and Ellen sat on the chair across from him. The other men closed the door as they left.

A million thoughts were running through Ellen's head. *Have I done something wrong? Has something happened to Shelly? Is it about Ron?*

"I think we need to leave the bunker," Ambassador Laurence said.

Ellen was stunned. They had plenty of food and water, not to mention they were literally sealed in.

“That’s what I thought you’d say,” Ambassador Laurence seemed as if he were trying to smile but failing. “That’s what they’ll all say.”

“Why?” Ellen finally managed to say.

Ambassador Laurence crossed the room as if he had wanted to pace but then returned to his seat on the couch, apparently deciding against it.

“The blast somehow broke the cooling units on two of the refrigerators.” He rubbed his temples. “We have food for another month, maybe two, but most of that food in the other refrigeration units will spoil.”

Ellen couldn’t believe it. She’d thought about leaving every day, but now that it seemed inevitable she was scared.

“Have you told –”

“Nobody,” he said. “And the man that told me has been sworn to secrecy. I just don’t know when or how to tell the others.”

The Ambassador was looking at Ellen as if she had an answer. She didn’t know why. He was the politician, the talker; he was the leader. His confusion only increased her fear.

“Where will we go?” Ellen said. “And when?”

She found herself wishing they’d gone with Mr. Baynes, but she didn’t say it.

“I think it will be best if I leave those decisions up to everyone.” Ambassador Laurence said. “It will go over better if I don’t seem like I’m giving orders.” He looked over at Ellen. “Don’t you think?”

His lack of conviction was starting to get on Ellen’s nerves. He had been so strong, so sure up until now, but part of her understood. Not knowing what’s out there, not knowing if they stood a chance at all. She could not be too disappointed in him. Even politicians were human.

“That sounds like a good idea,” she said. “What does Shelly think?”

Ambassador Laurence cast his eyes to the floor. “I haven’t told her.”

Ellen was surprised at first, but it quickly passed. The Ambassador and Shelly hadn’t talked much since the day the doors were sealed.

Ellen had wondered what had been going on between them for a while now. This was her chance to find out. “Why not?”

“You know she’s been quiet lately.” His seemed to be staring at something that wasn’t in the room. “I think she misses Lieutenant Maoki.”

“And how do you feel about that?” Ellen said. She felt as if she were talking to Aryana; trying to get her to realize the first time she liked a boy.

“I don’t –” Ambassador Laurence seemed to snap out of his trance and realize where Ellen’s line of questioning was headed. “It doesn’t matter. She’ll find out with everyone else.” He was quiet for a moment.

“So when are you going to tell everyone?” Ellen finally asked.

The question seemed to shock Ambassador Laurence, as if he hadn’t even thought about it. He didn’t answer the question, but it was clear he was thinking about it. He was thinking quietly for so long that Ellen was about to leave, thinking he’d forgotten she was even there.

When he answered, it was as if no time had elapsed since the question. He didn’t even move.

“I won’t,” he said.

Ellen was confused.

“But you just said –”

“They’ll still find out.” Ambassador Laurence came closer to her. “But I won’t tell them.” He smiled and led her to sit down again. “I’ll just send someone else’s security to get the meals from one of the broken units. They’ll have to notice, and when they do, everyone will discuss what to do.” He seemed to be talking to someone over Ellen’s shoulder because it was as if he were looking right past her. “The only sound decision is to leave, and it will go over better if they come to it on their own.”

Ambassador Laurence stared at Ellen. She didn’t know what to say. The plan was a good one, but she didn’t see why it was necessary. There had to be something he wasn’t telling her.

“Why not just tell them?” she said. “Why go through all of this?”

Ambassador Laurence struggled for words. He started and stopped, basically stuttering. He took a deep breath, gathering himself.

“I believe there is a man, one of the Chinese men, who knows more than he says.” Ambassador Laurence said. “I hope that if a discussion takes place in which we have no choice but to leave, he will share some of this information.”

“Why would anyone withhold information?” Ellen said. “And why do you think –”

“I don’t know.” Ambassador Laurence was clearly frustrated. “All I know is that I saw him with Lieutenant Maoki a lot during the first couple days in the bunker, and then he made himself scarce. He is one of the only men with no personal security, and when the charges were set and the door was sealed he was nowhere to be found. That’s why I wasn’t in the vault, I had my security looking for him.” Confusion flooded the Ambassador’s face. “When everyone finally came out, I was quickly put in charge and I’ve been too busy to pursue him ever since.”

“Don’t any of the other men talk about him?” Ellen said. “Why don’t you all just ask him?”

“I’ve tried.” Ambassador Laurence slouched and put his palms on his temples. “I think a couple of the other men know who he is.” He started pacing furiously. “They hide him from me, and I don’t know who I can ask and who I can’t.”

Ellen had never seen Ambassador Laurence angry. He seemed furious. His face was red and his clenched fists more vibrated than shook.

Ellen was silent for a moment. Then, almost as if he exhaled it, the anger seemed gone from his body. He stood and smoothed and buttoned his jacket.

“Thank you for listening, Ellen.” He took her hand in both of his. “I trust this will stay just between us.”

She nodded, he smiled his politician smile, and then he left.

At breakfast, the next day, it happened. After some whispering, all of the important men in the bunker slipped into the common area and shut the door.

Shelly seemed confused and a little scared, as did everyone else. Ellen wanted to tell her what was going on, but she couldn’t. The other people could see Shelly’s relief and ask Ellen themselves. She was a terrible liar, and she had given the Ambassador her word that their conversation would remain private.

By the end of breakfast, the men still hadn’t returned. Ellen was getting anxious. She wanted to know the plan: if they would leave, when they would leave, where they would go, what was out there. She planned on seeking out the Ambassador as soon as she could and getting her answers.

Finally, some of Ambassador Laurence's security men came into the dining area.

"Everyone into the common area," one of them said. Ellen was pretty sure his name was Agent Witchell. They never gave their first names; it was a little off-putting, but she had gotten used to it.

There was a makeshift podium at the head of the room and chairs set up to face it. It was not the Ambassador at the podium, nor was it any of the other powerful men. The man at the podium was small. He did not wear a suit, and he had no security standing around him. *This must be the man Ambassador Laurence was talking about.*

Ellen took a seat in the middle and Shelly sat beside her.

"Who is that man?" Shelly said. "Why is he up there?"

"I don't know," Ellen was thankful she didn't have to lie. "I can't say he looks familiar."

Shelly only nodded and sat in silent attention as the man on the podium raised his hands for quiet.

"Hello, thank you all for coming so quickly and quietly." The man seemed to look around the room and try to smile at everyone individually. "My name is Dr. Kitsuno Mokashi, and I was head of a special research team within the government."

It was easy to spot the men who had known who he was. They sat together in the front row far on the left. They were the only ones not whispering amongst themselves. Dr. Kitsuno raised his hands again for quiet.

"I was in charge of a secret initiative that studied the invasive species that is currently in control of our country."

Shocked silence followed the statement, but as soon as he tried to continue, questions erupted from all corners of the room; "Is he serious?" "Why weren't we told sooner?" "Do you expect us to believe this?"

It was chaos. Shelly clung to Ellen, and Ellen grabbed hold of the security guard to her right. He wasn't one of Ambassador Laurence's men, but she didn't care.

One of the men in the corner blew an air horn and the talking quickly ceased. Dr. Kitsuno smiled and nodded thankfully at the man.

"This species is sentient as well as being a native of this planet. It's natural habitat is deep ocean, but, as we're quickly learning, they are highly adaptive." Dr. Kitsuno must have anticipated another chaotic shouting of questions because he paused, but there was none; only shocked silence. "They are a diminutive species, no bigger than a young boy. They have no blood, no organs, and they do not breathe. Their bodies rely completely on electricity for both locomotion and self defense. They do not appear to have eyes or ears, but they do, so don't think they can't see or hear you."

A man in the back shot up.

"What do you mean?" He looked around, hoping to affirm his confusion. "Can this be true? Does it even matter as long as we are here? Surely our allies are coming to save us." He looked at the Ambassador before sitting.

"I'm telling you this because we will have to leave the bunker soon." There was another eruption of questions and shouting. The air horn had to be blown multiple times to bring order. "The blast that Lieutenant Maoki set, I assume to keep the invaders from gaining entry to the bunker, damaged two of the refrigeration units through the wall." Dr. Kitsuno smiled a strange smile before he continued. "Simply put, if we stay, we will starve."

"How long do we have?" a man in the front asked.

“Between one and two months depending on how well we ration.” He glanced at the man with the air horn. “But that doesn’t matter.” Everyone looked to their neighbor for answers, but eventually everyone focused on Dr. Kitsuno, pleading in their silence for him to continue. “We are leaving now. As we speak, security personnel from multiple parties are packing food, water, and other necessities.” He smiled around the room again. “We leave in three hours.”

Everyone was in frenzy. Shelly grabbed Ellen’s hand and started leading her to their shared quarters to pack. Shelly was crying. Ellen looked over at the Ambassador. He just sat in his chair while the chaos swirled around him. Men moved toward the podium, shouting questions, but Dr. Kitsuno ignored them and made for his quarters with the security of the three silent men behind him.

Packing was a dream. Neither Ellen nor Shelly spoke. They barely even looked at each other. One of the Ambassador’s security men came in and said he had been sent by the Ambassador to help them, but Shelly sent him away. She was angry, but Ellen didn’t know if it was more at the situation, the possible fate of Lieutenant Maoki, or the fact that Ambassador Laurence had kept her out of the loop. Ellen couldn’t help but look over at Shelly and see Aryana in one of her moods, upset and throwing a tantrum.

In that instant, Ellen felt guilty. She hadn’t really thought about Aryana in weeks. She wanted to slap herself. What kind of mother ever forgets about her missing child, even for a second? She wished Ron were there.

She took a picture of each of them out of her purse, kissed each one, and put them in her pockets. She would look at them all the time. That way she would never stop thinking about either of them again.

They had barely finished packing when Ambassador Laurence came in, flanked by two security men.

“Everyone is assembling in the common area,” he said.

Shelly just nodded and walked past him. He seemed to droop as she did. He looked at Ellen, and she tried her best to smile at him. She didn’t know if she succeeded, but he seemed to appreciate the effort. Ambassador Laurence seemed lost, almost equally swept away and confused by the recent turn of events as everyone else was. This made Ellen even more scared and anxious.

In the common room, people were arranged much as before. Dr. Kitsuno stood at the podium, but one of his friends was nowhere to be found.

“Excellent job.” He smiled at everyone like a grade school teacher. “We will most likely be leaving through the posterior tunnel. It is being checked now.”

Ellen didn’t even know there was a posterior tunnel, and she doubted she was alone in that, but nobody asked any questions. People just made idle talk amongst themselves. Ellen wished she could, but she had the Ambassador on her right and Shelly on her left, and both seemed unlikely to speak in the presence of the other.

Finally, a security man entered and whispered in Dr. Kitsuno’s ear. The man seemed worried, but Dr. Kitsuno smiled through the whole conversation. Ellen could tell from the way the man rushed to his seat that something was off.

“If you will follow me,” Dr. Kitsuno said, but before he could back away from the podium a whistle came from the back.

“What did he say?” A man shouted. “What’s wrong?”

Dr. Kitsuno flashed impatience for a second, maybe even anger, but he retook the podium with a smile.

“Nothing important,” He said. “Just that the lights require a switch, which he asked my permission to turn on and that the clocks in the tunnel are eight hours fast.” The man seemed about to ask another question, but Dr. Kitsuno cut him off. “Don’t worry; the sun will be shining when we come out the other end.”

Dr. Kitsuno left the podium with no further questions and everyone followed him.

The way was through a door in the back of the kitchen that required a number code entered in a key pad. There were three such doors along the way. Ellen didn’t know that the bunker extended this far in any direction. She hadn’t felt this old since Aryana had tried to get her into a mother daughter volleyball game. She just wanted to sit and rest, but the line seemed so mechanized, she figured everyone would just walk right over her.

Eventually, they entered a tunnel. It was clearly not the bunker anymore. The walls were stone and strung with eerily dim orangish lights. The ground was flat, for the most part, though every now and then, Ellen stubbed her toe on a rock or some other sort of protrusion.

They walked for about an hour. Ellen kept wondering where they would go when they got out. Dr. Kitsuno hadn’t talked about that. Would they go for other borders? Find an airport? What if they met some of those little invaders he had talked about? Could the security teams defeat them?

She was in the middle of one of these thoughts when shouting broke her focus.

“Back!” They yelled from the front.

Ellen looked forward, jumping, trying to see the front of the line. Before a security guard spun her around and started pulling her down the tunnel, she saw it: the outdoors. It was beautiful. She barely got a taste of the crisp night air before she was whisked back down the tunnel.

Suddenly she was scared. *The night air.* It was supposed to be daylight, barely eleven in the morning.

“Keep running!” She heard from behind her. “They’re inside the tunnel.”

Oh my God. The monsters? The invaders? How?

She heard gun shots and screams, but was being pulled too quickly to look back, but she wished she had. She wished she had looked back and at least seen one because the next second, the lights went out.

The man pulling her didn’t run for long before he tripped over something and brought Ellen down with him. She slammed into the ground and heard the man scramble back to his feet and start running again. He didn’t even look for her.

She laid there for some time, in the darkness. *Maybe they just left. Maybe the security men killed them.* She felt tired and too weak to move so she curled up in a corner.

She kept telling herself that someone would find her; that the Ambassador or Shelly would stumble upon her and bring her outside where the security men had surely defeated the whatever-they-weres.

Every second she expected to see a familiar silhouette coming down the dim light of the tunnel. Then she saw the glow. It was small and white, like a wispy motorcycle headlight in the distance. Then there were more of them, white and beautiful.

As they got closer she could make out legs and arms. When they stood before her, she didn’t want to see them, but she couldn’t look away. They were beautiful, wickedly beautiful. They seemed to stare at her with eyeless faces, but then she remembered they did have eyes. They could see her.

A couple of them seemed to stare at her for a minute before approaching. They stood over her. When it reached down for her, she flinched and it withdrew. That surprised her. It seemed to smile, but it was so big and pointy, she didn't know what kind of smile it was.

Ellen started to cry. She took out the pictures of Ron and Aryana, but she couldn't see them very well. She scooted closer to the little thing to use its glow. She smiled as she looked at the pictures, but she was also sad. She would never see them again.

When it reached for her again, she handed it the pictures. It seemed surprised and looked at them for some time. Then it nodded and reached for her again. This time she did not flinch. She leaned forward and it put its fingers on her temples. There was a flash of color, then only darkness.

Cedric Mankins

It wasn't in their directive, but John and Cedric had classified the specimen taxonomically. They had settled on *Fulgur umbra*, it meant lightning shadows. The Greeks and Romans didn't have a word for electricity.

John and Cedric had run all the tests they could on the specimen. Every scrap of viable material had been used. For the previous week, they had met with D.O.D. specialists to relate their findings. They all wanted to know the results, but John and Cedric didn't have any answers. The D.O.D. men wanted to know what the Umbra could do in combat or what they could build, and these things were beyond the scope of Cedric and John's knowledge. Cedric hoped that today would be their last meeting until they could get more specimens to run more tests.

The same men were in the room as were there the last three days; General Guster, Admiral White, and Defense Secretary Nelson. They already looked disappointed, especially the Secretary. He was a rigid man that looked at everyone as if they were his subjects and spoke as if they were his disciples.

"Good morning, Doctors," Secretary Nelson said. "What glorious insights have you brought for us today?"

The condescension was what agitated Cedric the most. It was as if Nelson actually thought he could do Cedric and John's jobs better. The Admiral and General just sat in their chairs while the Secretary grilled Cedric and John. Cedric couldn't decide if he liked them more or less for it.

"Good morning, Mr. Secretary," Cedric said. "We ran a few more tests, and have a couple of results, but nothing I would call glorious."

Secretary Nelson nodded and waved his hand like a king bored with his jester.

"I've continued my research on the brains," John said. "The original is still active and showing no signs of giving out anytime soon."

"So you're still quite certain that their brains can exist outside their bodies?" Nelson's tone told everyone in the room that a snide remark was on its way. "That's quite helpful; do they die when you put a bullet in them?"

John sat stunned as most scientists do when someone fails to realize the gravity of their discovery. It is a helpless, sinking feeling and Cedric had become accustomed to it since the Secretary and his men had shown up.

“Yes, Mr. Secretary,” John said. “Bullets do the trick, but some of our other research suggests that bullets may not —”

“You had your chance Megman,” Nelson said. “Mankins, how are things coming on your end?”

“We’ve finished testing on the material that fills their body cavities,” Cedric said. “It serves no biological purposes, much as we suspected.” Cedric could see that Nelson was tuning out already, he had to get to the point. “It adjusts very rapidly to changes in pressure. We believe it is how they survive in their deep ocean environment. It allows their bodies to handle pressures that would crush our bodies.”

Secretary Nelson leaned forward to ask a question, but Cedric answered it before he even spoke.

“No, Mr. Secretary, this does not allow us to rule out the possibility that they are extraterrestrials, they could survive in the depths of space and they could do it without ships.”

Cedric didn’t know why the alien question was so important to everyone. Whether the Umbra were from Mars, Jupiter, some planet millions of light-years away, or were Earth natives from the deep ocean, they were here now.

“Fascinating,” Nelson said in a way that rendered Cedric unable to decide if it was sarcastic or sincere. He assumed sarcastic. “Dr. Megman, can you tell us anything of their intelligence?”

“My findings are the same as they have been,” John said. “Their brain to body size ratio indicates that they are every bit as intelligent as us.”

“We also —” Cedric said.

“We nothing, Cedric,” John said.

The Admiral and General were shocked, but Secretary Nelson seemed only amused.

“Go on, Dr. Mankins,” Secretary Nelson said as if he were a schoolboy instigating a fight.

“I believe that the Umbra’s use of electricity instead of any biological form of energy skews our ability to judge their intelligence using our normal methods of body to brain ratio.”

Secretary Nelson was smiling so big his eyes were nearly closed.

“Dr. Megman, what do you think of this?”

John looked at Cedric as if he were a child that had spoken without raising his hand.

“I think that it’s a fine theory, but we would never be able to prove it unless we had a living specimen that was willing to talk to us.” John looked over at Cedric. “And where is the technology if they’re so damn smart?”

“Even if you’re right, John,” Cedric said. “They should have some technology, right?” John didn’t respond. “So either they don’t need it, we haven’t seen it yet, or —”

“You’re gonna love this, Mr. Secretary,” John said. “Just listen to this ‘or.’”

Cedric wanted to hit John like he’d never wanted to hit anyone. Nelson already saw them as failures, fighting amongst themselves wouldn’t help anything.

“Or,” Cedric glared at John. “Their bodies are the technology.”

Nelson laughed and John seemed about to join him.

“Cedric, even if they engineer their own bodies,” John said. “Why is that all they have? The oceans contain a majority of the Earth’s titanium, and they have more of almost every other resource than we do as well.”

“I don’t know,” Cedric said. “But the petrified organs can’t be ignored.”

“There are other, more logical ways to —”

"I know," Cedric said. "And I'm probably wrong, but they need to hear all the possibilities."

"No," Secretary Nelson stood. "We need to hear all of the results." He leaned in and, when he spoke, his voice was harsh. "We need to know what you know, not what you think."

John and Cedric stood in silence, both leaned back a little as if they were afraid that Secretary Nelson would leap across the table and kill them both right there.

"You both have wasted enough time and resources," Secretary Nelson said. "The last batch of specimens you received was obtained in U.S. waters, and some further inland. Does that inspire a sense of urgency, gentlemen?" Cedric was shocked and this seemed to please Secretary Nelson. "Expect a memo later today detailing how we'll be moving forward." He buttoned his suit and moved to leave, his pet Admiral and General followed. "This place needs to be doing what we need it to be doing, not exploring possibilities like you're trying to publish in some science magazine."

With that, he brushed in between Cedric and John and walked out the door.

The whole walk back to the lab, John was talking Cedric's ear off about some rumor he'd heard that the government was detaining two men who had witnessed the Umbra multiple times during the China takeover. He didn't understand how John wasn't worried about his job. It sounded like they were going to be fired. Cedric didn't know if he really cared whether or not he got fired. Each possibility had its good points: if he didn't get fired, he got to keep studying the Umbra, but if he got fired, he got to be with Caren and the kids.

He didn't get to see Caren or the kids very often anymore, but he did every chance he got. He was currently trying to arrange for them to move into the facilities, but he was meeting a lot of resistance because of the high level of classification and security around his project. Caren was getting worse all the time. He had hired a nurse and a nanny, and he called her at least five times a day. He used to love the sound of her voice, but now he could hear the sickness in it. He still called though; it seemed to make her happier.

He didn't really see the point of the classification anymore. There had already been reports all over the internet and the news of Umbra all along the west coast and they seemed to be moving south. There were thousands of disappearances, and the public was starting to talk, especially the bloggers. He was looking at the latest blog updates when John burst into the room.

"The nerve of those D.O.D. stooges," John said. "Did you read that memo that went out this morning?"

Cedric closed the page and spun his chair around.

"I haven't looked at it yet," Cedric said. "What's going on?"

John slammed the paper down on Cedric's desk and pointed to the second paragraph.

"Read," he said.

Cedric glanced over the paper and looked at John in confusion.

"What's the problem?" Cedric said. "It says we're getting a piece of the Umbra's equipment to study. It should be arriving today. How is it that I'm more excited about this than you are?"

John looked at Cedric in exasperation.

"Keep reading." John actually grabbed Cedric's head and turned it back toward the page. He didn't have to get far into the second paragraph to see what John was making a fuss about.

"Ah, I see now." Cedric's excitement left him. "They would assign him, wouldn't they?"

“That’s not the worst of it.” John snatched the paper from Cedric’s desk and read it aloud. “Dr. Jordan Bryce will be accompanying the equipment.” He glared at the sentence as if it were the man himself. “He is to be in charge of all study on the ‘Umbra’ from here on out as he has been deemed a ranking expert after seeing them in the field.”

John crumpled the paper and threw it into the trash. Cedric tried to think of something to say. John hated Bryce. To be honest, they both did. He was a free lance pop scientist who’d made his money writing apps and occasionally stealing grant money from real engineers to build some hokey science project for his and his investors own glorification. He had never made one thing to improve the lives of the general population, and he was an arrogant little prick.

“This must mean they’re going public with it soon,” Cedric said. “Why else put his face and name on it?”

“Awareness is probably the best idea,” John said, still angry. “People need to know that these things exist and what they can do.”

John turned to leave, but the doors opened almost right into him and a handsome, young, smirking Dr. Jordan Bryce entered the room with a very large package on the cart behind him.

“Hello,” Dr. Bryce said. “You must be Megman and Mankins.” He looked them over. “I’m sorry, I don’t know which is which.” He stuck out his hand and John took it, smiling.

“I’m Dr. Megman,” he said. “And you are?”

Dr. Bryce seemed authentically surprised and a bit insulted. Cedric almost smiled.

“Dr. Jordan Bryce.” Dr. Bryce waited to see if the name sparked a reaction, but John held his expression.

“Oh, the one from the memo,” John said. “How do you do?”

“Fine,” Dr. Bryce said, clearly masking annoyance.

Cedric stepped forward and gave a firm hand shake. Dr. Bryce noticed and smiled.

“What you see behind me is the machine mentioned in the memo.” His smirk returned. “I’ll be dismantling and examining it.” He glanced back at John and Cedric. “There will be a lot of sitting around while I work my way through it, but there may be some biological components so I’ll need you both to be present.”

“Biological components?” Cedric said.

“What makes you think that?” John said.

Dr. Bryce smiled.

“After reading your reports as well as observing them in the field –” he paused, possibly hoping for an ooh or aah, but didn’t seem too disappointed when there was none – “I’ve concluded that these things –”

“The Umbra,” John said.

Dr. Bryce flashed anger, but quickly concealed it.

“Yes,” he said. “The Umbra, as you two have named them. Must be growing much of their technology. They don’t seem to have much in the way of craft or machinery of their own. From what I’ve seen they just take over ours. They must be growing some kind of biotechnology to compensate.”

Cedric was silent. That all seemed like collection of giant assumptions on very little data, but Dr. Bryce was known for just that, and Cedric hadn’t ever seen them in action so he couldn’t be sure of any of it.

“If you’ll follow me,” Dr. Bryce said as he walked from the room.

Cedric and John followed. For the last couple days, almost around the clock, the tech team had been working on a room down the hall. Cedric hadn't seen much of it, but what he did see confused him. Most of the machines he saw them putting in weren't familiar.

When they entered, the lights came on automatically. The room seemed to be chrome from floor to ceiling. There were lasers and saws and diamond drills. Cedric had a feeling that some of the stuff seemed to be there just to look impressive.

"Your tax dollars at work, gentlemen," Dr. Bryce said, throwing his hands in the air and motioning around the room. "I'll figure these 'Umbra' out soon enough. From what I've read, this machine is believed to be the key." He put a face guard on, grabbed a cutting torch and motioned for Cedric and John to stand back.

"Wait," John said. "Aren't we going to see what it does first?"

Dr. Bryce turned off the torch and lifted the face guard, apparently just so Cedric and John could see him roll his eyes.

"We already know what it does," he said. "Two men were sent back from China by Mr. Poole." Cedric didn't know the name, and his confusion seemed to make Dr. Bryce smile. This made Cedric uncomfortable. "One of them worked with the Umbra for a short time, and the other met them multiple times in combat and was put into one of these machines."

Cedric was stunned. *So it was true.*

"So what does it do?" Cedric finally managed to say.

"They've only been here five days," Dr. Bryce said. "But from what we've gotten out of them so far, it appears to induce some kind of coma-like state in which the subject relives their life." Cedric started to speak, but Dr. Bryce cut him off. "To what end, we do not know." He smiled one of his condescending smiles and clapped John and Cedric on the back. "But that's what we're here to find out."

Cedric and John nodded and stepped back as Dr. Bryce started cutting the casing into sections and removing it so he could look at the interior of the machine. There were no seams on it, as if it were crafted and molded from a single piece of metal.

"Dr. Megman, run this to the lab for me, will you?" Dr. Bryce didn't even look back as he held the piece of metal over his shoulder. "I think it's titanium or some sort of titanium alloy, but I can't be sure."

John was clearly not fond of being a lackey, but Cedric knew he would never give Bryce the satisfaction of objecting.

"Right away," John said.

As soon as John had left the room, Dr. Bryce turned off the laser and turned to Cedric.

"Dr. Mankins," he said. "I hope there are no hard feelings between us."

Cedric was caught a little off-guard. He hadn't expected this from Dr. Bryce.

"Why would there be?" Cedric said.

"I mean about my being put in charge even though that's been your post since this thing started." Dr. Bryce reached out his hand and smiled the same smile as before. "I hope we will be able to work together amicably."

Cedric shook his hand, but somehow Dr. Bryce had managed to even make that sentiment of amiability into condescension. He shook barely once, released Cedric's hand, and returned to his work without another word; it was as if the hand shake were something required in the situation and nothing more.

After a few moments, John returned, and he and Cedric continued to watch Dr. Bryce in silence.

Dr. Bryce was meticulous. After a few moments it was as if he'd forgotten that Cedric and John were there. For almost a half hour, he didn't acknowledge them while he cut around and across the machine so that the metallic shell was divided into eight equal parts.

"Both of you, put those gloves on and come over here," Dr. Bryce said. "You two grab that end of this section, and I'll get this one."

Cedric looked at John. He seemed captivated as they moved closer and could see the inside of the machine. Once Cedric got close enough, he saw why.

The interior was magnificent, not just a tangle of cords, wires, and circuits. It looked organized in a haphazard way, almost like a piece of art. Bands of wire almost seemed to glow even though there was no power going to the machine. The wires wound in arcs through eyelets and around rods, but they all met in the center at a luminous glob that gave off a bluish-green light. It seemed to pulse.

"One, two," Dr. Bryce's voice snapped Cedric out of his daydream. "Three." They all bent their legs and lifted the shell piece from the machine. It was much heavier than Cedric had anticipated, but the three of them got it safely into the corner.

Dr. Bryce exhaled and wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his lab coat.

"Well, men, we have two options," he said. "We can either do that seven more times or blindfold some of the security men and have them do it."

Cedric laughed until he realized Dr. Bryce was serious. John only smiled at Dr. Bryce the way a grandmother smiles when she's told a dirty joke. Dr. Bryce didn't seem to like it.

"All right then," he said. "We'll do the rest of the top portions and then I'll see if we even need to bother with the bottom four."

"Fine by us," Cedric said. "We'll be over here if you need us."

The wheels in Dr. Bryce's head seemed to be turning. Cedric had the feeling he and John were about to be immensely annoyed.

"I think I've got enough in the top portion to keep me busy the rest of the day," Dr. Bryce said. "You two can go back to what you were doing and I'll schedule a briefing for early tomorrow morning so I can relay my findings to the Directors and yourselves."

Cedric didn't like the fact that he and John could miss an important or exciting discovery, but he didn't want to give Dr. Bryce the satisfaction of allowing him to pull rank in a confrontation.

"Good thinking," Cedric said. "We've got a couple hours of video to sift through, and I haven't been home in a while."

John nodded and took a step for the door. Cedric moved to follow.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Dr. Bryce said. "With the occurrences becoming more widespread, they're heightening security. By next week, we won't be allowed off base anymore."

Cedric was speechless. He could see the pity in John's eyes as he looked over to his old friend for words.

"Don't worry though, Dr. Mankins," Dr. Bryce said. "I've arranged for your family to move on base."

Cedric was shocked. This didn't seem to mesh with anything he'd ever heard about Dr. Bryce. Could there be an ulterior motive? What could he gain from this? Was he really just being nice?

"Thank you," Cedric stammered. "I don't know what else to say."

"You're very welcome," Dr. Bryce said. "When I heard of your wife's condition I had to do something. My father died of a similar cancer."

Cedric and Dr. Bryce's eyes met for just a moment. Cedric thought he saw something, a flash of something, but it was gone too quickly. The two men nodded at each other and Cedric exited the room with John close behind.

"You head home Cedric," John said. "I'll finish the tape reviews." Cedric turned to object, but John cut him off. "Can't have that dickhead being nicer to you than I am."

Cedric smiled, shook his friend's hand, and headed home to give his wife and children the good news.

Lieutenant Maoki

The room was strange. It was cold metal from floor to ceiling. At least there was padding and blankets on his bed, no pillow though. He wished he had looked around more when the Walkers had put him in here the first time. The door had stayed open and there had been more light; maybe there was a way out that, now, he would never find.

Lieutenant Maoki hadn't seen any light in what he assumed was a week except when the door opened from time to time and one of the children stepped in with bread, water, and, sometimes, fresh fruit. He remembered being led there by the Walkers after he and his men had finally been overtaken, but he hadn't seen any Walkers since.

After they'd sealed the bunker, he and his men had gone north for days, avoiding the coast and the rivers. The land was different, as if it'd never been theirs, but so little had changed. The thing that startled Lieutenant Maoki the most was the long, metallic poles that were all over the place. They shot lightning back and forth from time to time and each one was like a flag the children had planted, claiming this land for their own.

They'd been careful and travelled only during the day, but one morning they awoke surrounded by children and Walkers with their weapons somehow taken.

Some of the men raised their hands in surrender immediately and some were too petrified to do anything, but some resisted. Lieutenant Maoki couldn't get the image of their charge out of his head. They had no weapons, but they charged the Walkers and the eerie children with clenched fists. Chen had led them. They fell, as if struck, no more than ten meters from their targets. After that, everyone raised their hands in surrender. He thought mostly of Chen and what Chen must have thought as he looked back to see Lieutenant Maoki simply watching. The more he sat in the darkness, the more the Lieutenant hated himself as a coward.

Once the Walkers found out he was in charge, Lieutenant Maoki had been separated from his men. He still had not been told what had become of them. He wasn't quite sure where he was; they had been blindfolded for the trip and put in a trailer pulled by what had sounded like an old truck.

Sometimes, he swore he heard voices outside the room, the voices of his men. Every waking second and whenever he dreamed, his cowardice ate at him. He had failed them. To save the bunker, he had led them back into harm and not even led them to resist once found. He hated himself, but he had decided that atonement was at hand.

For some hours, he had been waiting by the door with his blankets in hand. When it opened, he would grab the little bastard, pull it inside, and wrap it in the blanket. That would give him a bargaining chip. They would have to speak to him, to give him answers, or they would risk losing one of their own. Worst case scenario, he ended up having to kill the little monster and maybe the Walkers would rethink worshipping them like gods.

Suddenly, the door opened a crack and a small black hand reached in with the plate of bread. When it reached back in with the glass of water, Lieutenant Maoki grabbed it by the wrist, yanked it into the room, and enfolded it in the blankets.

He could feel the shocks pulsing through his body – the blankets didn't insulate as he'd anticipated – but the shocks just made his muscles contract harder. Eventually, he was squeezing so hard that it could not struggle. Then the shocks stopped.

The door was still open, so he leaned his head into the hallway.

"I have one of the little monsters," he shouted. "I demand to be spoken to."

For a while there was nothing, but after a few moments slippered feet shuffled across the shiny, metal floors. He could hear the rush in the gait of whatever approached.

Finally, a big Walker rounded the far corner of the hall. He seemed anxious, but spoke calmly.

"Lieutenant, do not do anything rash," he said. "The children mean you no harm. They mean no harm to anyone."

"Bullshit," Lieutenant Maoki said. "Where are my men? I want to speak to Chen."

"They have not been harmed," the Walker said in his annoying, calm voice. "But you cannot speak to them. They sleep."

"Wake them up," Lieutenant Maoki shouted. "I want proof they're all right."

"You have the word of the children and –"

Lieutenant Maoki could feel his hold on the child tightening.

"You better at least get me somebody more helpful to talk to before I squeeze the life out of this creature."

That seemed to get the Walker's complete attention. He put his hands up in submission, bowed a little, turned on his heels, and hurried back down the hallway.

Lieutenant Maoki sat, feeling the thing under the blanket against his body. It was completely still. It didn't even breathe. He was about to check and make sure it was alive, but then he remembered what Dr. Kitsuno had told him at the bunker. *They don't breathe, they don't eat, they don't sleep, and they can't speak.*

It seemed like a long time for nobody to have returned, but Lieutenant Maoki had lost all sense of time. He didn't even know if it was night or day outside.

After a while, he started thinking that they were just waiting for him to fall asleep, or for the creature to escape, but then he heard footsteps in the hallway. There was more than one set of footsteps, but he could also hear another sound. It sounded like wheels. He had no idea what they would be bringing.

They did not move as quickly as before, but when they did finally round the corner, Lieutenant Maoki was further confused.

He saw the same big Walker as before, but he was pushing a large monitor, and he could see the black feet of one of the children behind him. Those black feet made him want to squeeze the bundle under his blanket to death even more.

"That's far enough," Lieutenant Maoki said when they were about fifteen meters from the door.

The Walker stopped, but the child took a few steps forward so as to stand beside the monitor. Then, it motioned for the Walker to go, which he promptly did after plugging the monitor into an outlet.

Lieutenant Maoki and the child just stared at each other for some time with the blue glow of the screen making its black, deformed skin even more unsettling.

Suddenly, the screen went black, then white words appeared one at a time.

Hello, the child seemed to nod as the words appeared, as if to imitate conversation. **I am here to negotiate the release of my brother.** After a pause, the screen cleared and new words appeared. **What are your demands?**

Lieutenant Maoki had more questions than demands, but he could not afford to waiver.

"I demand to see that my men have not been harmed."

It nodded and appeared to be focused on something else for some time after, but it never moved. The screen went green, then cut to what appeared to be a camera feed. Lieutenant Maoki motioned for the monitor to be brought closer. The child walked a couple paces forward and the monitor rolled behind it as if it were tethered somehow. *Magnetism.*

Once he could see the screen clearly, Lieutenant Maoki held up his hand for the monster to halt. It did.

As he looked at the screen, the camera seemed to move in on the face. It didn't take long for him to realize it was Chen. He was on some sort of metal slab with monitors and nodes attached to his head. He could see similar machines in the room. He assumed they were the other men.

"How do I know that's a live feed?" Lieutenant Maoki said. "That could have been pre recorded."

The thing nodded as if to concede his point and, as before, seemed to be focused elsewhere for several seconds.

It turned to face the monitor just as the big Walker from the hallway walked into view on the screen.

"Hello, Lieutenant Maoki," he said. "Your men are fine, just as I said."

As soon as the Walker finished talking, the screen went green then blue and words appeared again.

Does this satisfy your concerns? The child just stared at him as a school guidance councilor did a troubled student. It was strange to feel the eyes upon him but not be able to see them.

The two stared at each other for some time. Lieutenant Maoki could not think of anything to say. No, he could think of too much to say and couldn't pick one.

"Only one," he said.

What are your other concerns? The words appeared on the screen and seemed to stare at him when he could not think of something to say. **Do you require greater sustenance?**

"No, I wish to inquire why you provide me with sustenance," he said. "Why am I still here while my men are in those machines?"

The child focused elsewhere for a few seconds again before words appeared on the screen.

Observational study, flashed on the screen. **But now that you're aware, your study must be discontinued.**

Discontinued, he thought over and over again. Would they kill him? He felt as if they saw him as a lab rat or an experimental robot. He had prepared for many responses, but that one had stunned him.

"What is happening in the world?" he finally said.

He had been wondering for months. If he was going to be discontinued, he would have the answer.

Much happens in the world. The child seemed to attempt to portray confusion, but it failed, as if it were a new expression. **You must be more specific.**

The response infuriated him. He could feel his grip tightening on the one beneath his blanket. The look on its face as the words appeared on the screen – it was being sarcastic. He wanted to crush the life out of his hostage.

“What is the world doing about you monsters?” he said. “Where are our allies? Where is anyone?”

It smiled and Lieutenant Maoki thought he would be sick. The teeth seemed to multiply as the smile spread, and its mouth was wider than any mouth had a right to be. But it was the missing eyes that bothered him most. He felt as if he’d been hit by a car in the night without a chance to see the headlights.

Most are conquered. It started to take a step forward, but the Lieutenant held up his hand and squeezed the demon under his blanket tighter. **The others soon will be.**

“How is that possible?” he said. “It’s so fast. Has nobody fought? Are there really that many of you?”

The screen flashed red, then green, then back to blue, as if to consciously interrupt him.

Not remotely. Its smile was gone now. It seemed to be focused on Lieutenant Maoki’s face. Maybe completing the final part of the observational study. **Mankind outnumbers our species approximately twelve to one; otherwise you would have fallen already.**

The screen flashed for a second, then displayed a picture of the world map. **The Southern Hemisphere is ours, as well as all of Asia except the deserts.** It took another bold step forward as those sections of the map darkened on the screen. Lieutenant Maoki did not put up his hand. It smiled. **All that remains is the old world.** It held up its right hand with the palm up. **And the new.** It looked at both hands before snapping them both shut.

Lieutenant Maoki was afraid for a moment, but then all fear left him. When it smiled and took another step, he smiled and stood. This seemed to surprise it and this made the Lieutenant happy.

“It’s been nice talking to you,” Lieutenant Maoki said. “We’ll have to do it again sometime.”

For a moment, the child just stared, but for the instant before Lieutenant Maoki jumped back into his room with his hostage, he saw real fear in that little bastard’s eyes.

As soon as he hit the ground in his room, he kicked the door shut and put his back against it. He could feel the charge on the door and in the air of the other child trying to get in, but he didn’t care. It would be too late.

His hostage was struggling, but it was very weak. He squeezed the crown of its head as hard as he could: harder and harder until his chest and shoulder hurt.

He could hear the Walker shouting down the hall, but he just kept squeezing.

The Walker hurled his body against the door. It almost knocked the Lieutenant over, but he pushed back against the door and kept squeezing.

Two, three, four more times the big Walker hurled himself against the door. It was getting harder for the Lieutenant to keep him out, but he kept squeezing.

Again, the Walker threw himself against the door. Lieutenant Maoki knew he would not withstand the next one anyway, so he threw himself on the floor and tried to use his body weight to squeeze harder.

The door flew open behind him just as he felt the skull pop beneath him. Lieutenant Maoki rolled over smiling and flung the limp body towards the door. The Walker seemed

horrified, but Lieutenant Maoki could not read the child's face. He hoped it was sad; he hoped it felt a loss like nothing it had ever experienced.

In an instant, the Walker stood over Lieutenant Maoki, grabbed his shirt, pulled him up, and struck him so hard he never felt himself hit the ground.

Everything seemed like shadows and blurs. He was being carried. The walls were bright and they seemed to amplify the light. It hurt his eyes, and the Lieutenant found himself wishing he were back in the darkness of his cell.

Eventually, they came to a dimmer room. His head was still swimming, but he could see the boots of men on tables. They were military boots.

The metal that he was set on was cold, but it felt odd, as if it pulsed.

He tried rolling his head around to make it difficult as they attached the nodes and monitors, but when the big Walker grabbed his collar again, he stopped being difficult and just smiled at them.

He could hear what sounded like words, but it was as if he were under water.

"... Your mouth" was all he was able to make out, so he opened it.

It was a clip, and it pinched when they put it on, but it was small and he was still able to smile at them.

The blurs that were their bodies started to move away. He grabbed the child by the shoulder and motioned for it to come closer. When it was very close to his face, he lifted his head to where a man's ear would have been.

"We'll talk soon," he said.

Then he laid his head back down.

His vision was still blurry, but Lieutenant Maoki thought he saw a smile on its face. It wasn't a smile like before. It wasn't cruel, or odd, or sarcastic. It seemed to be authentically pleased.

Then, the blurs were gone and he could hear the hum of the machine getting louder. There was a flash of light so bright he closed his eyes, then darkness. From all sides he heard whirling, clicking, whirling, clicking – silence.

He heard his father speaking softly, some people panicking, and a voice he didn't recognize but knew, in that instant, that he missed the woman dearly.

"Sir, you have to leave," a man said. "She is losing a lot of blood."

Lieutenant saw his father crying, something he'd never seen in his life, as he was ushered from the room, and when his vision shifted to the side; he saw a pale woman, arms outstretched, using all her strength just to mouth some words Maoki could barely hear.

"My baby," she said as her arms slowly fell to her sides. "Let me hold him once before I go." There was a loud, long beep and her arms fell to her sides. He heard a sad, long cry and realized it was his own.

Ellen

When she awoke, Ellen was in a metallic room with very bright lights. It seemed almost blinding. Her hands and feet were strapped down. She looked around, but her head was inside a little plastic cocoon so she couldn't see very much. All she could see for sure was that there were other people lying around her in similar devices.

Suddenly, the plastic surrounding her head withdrew into the metallic surface she was laying on. A monstrous little black thing was walking around. It looked horrid, but it walked like one of the marvelous, white glowing ones she had seen in the tunnel.

“Where?” was all she got out before realizing the dryness in her throat. It was painful to speak.

It had heard her though, and came to her side. It pushed some buttons on the side of her device and just stood over her.

After a couple seconds, a brilliant glow appeared by her other side. They all looked the same, but it looked at her in a way that told her it was the one from the tunnel. She wasn’t scared and that started to scare her. *I should struggle. I should get out of here.* But she just lay there.

The white one reached under her slab and brought out her pictures. She hurt herself when she reached for them, forgetting that her arms were bound.

It held up the picture of Aryana and stepped to the side, so Ellen could see the slab next to hers. It took her a couple seconds, but then she saw it. *Aryana*. Her daughter was right there, just out of reach. She struggled against the bonds. She could feel her skin tear and bleed. She just wanted to hold her daughter, to kiss her.

After a couple efforts, Ellen was out of energy. The white one gave the pictures to the darker one and started attaching little nodes and sensors to Ellen’s head. Some were on her temples, some behind her ears, one at the base of her neck, and one in the middle of her forehead.

Then it put its finger on her lips and smiled at her. It had a strange clip in its hand. It opened its mouth and pointed inside. Ellen felt herself smile. She didn’t know why she was smiling. She knew she shouldn’t be. Nonetheless, she opened her mouth and it clipped the thing to her tongue. It was uncomfortable, but it didn’t hurt.

Ellen looked over at Aryana and tried one last time to reach for her. She felt the bond come free and she reached out, but she could not reach. When she looked down, she saw that it had been unstrapped. When she looked up, it was smiling at her. Her arm fell to the side, but it picked it up and held her hand in both of its hands. She got a small shock. The hands were scaly and smooth, but not wet or in any way uncomfortable.

It looked at her for a while. They stared at each other. Then, it looked over at the black one and nodded. Ellen could hear and feel the machine beneath her. It squeezed her hand as she gazed into its eyeless face. She never looked away until the merciful being reached down and closed her eyes. She kept them closed and squeezed its hand. The sound was in her head now. Whirling, clicking, whirling, clicking – silence.

All was dark and she forgot where she was. Then, she heard a baby cry and her father’s voice saying, “She’s beautiful, Suz, our beautiful baby girl.”

Cedric Mankins

It was about a two hour drive since they’d moved to the new facility further inland. All of the government installations had been moved further inland. Cedric didn’t mind the drive; it was beautiful country, but he wouldn’t miss it once Caren and the kids could be moved on base.

He worried about the children on the base; he assumed he could not bring the nanny, and they would be so bored. Caren would try to keep them happy, but she was so tired lately, and Aaron was a handful. Nora was very good at helping though; she was such a good girl. The more

he thought about it, the more he thought this move presented more problems than solutions, but he didn't care. More than anything he wanted Caren and the kids close.

When Cedric finally got home, Nora was completely engrossed in her favorite show. It was some mind-numbing show on the Disney Channel; she barely mumbled, "Hi, Daddy," as he walked by.

Caren was in the kitchen, taking her pills. When he walked in, she spun and smiled as she swallowed the last few.

"Hey, honey." She looked at the clock on the microwave. "You're home early."

She gave him a big hug and he held onto her for a couple extra seconds.

"Yeah, John and –" Caren put her finger over her lips and pointed to Aaron's room. Cedric smiled and lowered his voice. "John and the new boss let me off early."

They both smiled and kissed each other.

"Eww," Nora said. Cedric hadn't heard her enter, so he jumped. "Kissing is gross."

Cedric stuck his tongue out at Nora and kissed Caren again. Nora giggled, gave him a hug around the waist, and went back into the living room.

"So where is Whitney?" Cedric said.

"She had a lunch date." Caren went to the sink and started washing dishes. "After she put Aaron down for his nap, I let her go." Caren slapped Cedric's hand as he tried to help with the dishes. "She'll be back in an hour. I can handle this."

Cedric gave Caren a kiss on the cheek, went into their room, and turned on the TV. It was already on the local news channel. They seemed very excited about something, so Cedric turned it up.

"Many experts are questioning the authenticity of the tape," the anchorman said. "And the White House will not release its statement until noon tomorrow via press conference. We'll be right back with the tape in question, after the break."

Cedric muted the TV when he saw Caren in the doorway.

"They've been running this story all morning," she said. "I've only seen bits and pieces of the tape."

She sat next to Cedric on the bed. She seemed different than she had in the kitchen.

"What is the video about?" Cedric said.

Caren stared at the TV without reply, so Cedric turned the volume back on.

"It's not really about anything," she said. "It's a message from some high up man in the Chinese government." She turned to face Cedric, the look on her face was something completely alien to him. It was as if the light was all gone from her eyes, her cheeks, everywhere. It was almost as if the lights in the room were dimming along with her. "He just talks about what's going on in China."

Cedric didn't know if he wanted to watch the tape anymore. What could it say? Would it be the truth or a lie? Would it talk about the Umbra? Whatever it did, he didn't like the effect it was having on Caren.

Caren grabbed the remote and turned the volume back up as soon as the news came back on. She did it so quickly; it was as if she'd been waiting for it.

"Hello again," the anchorman said. "The video you're about to see is, to our best knowledge, completely authentic. The facts it claims to state are, as yet, unverified, and the views expressed are not necessarily the views of this station."

The anchorman straightened his back and gave a nod, and then the screen shifted to what appeared to be a homemade video of a man sitting at a big office desk. The man was not speaking English, but after a couple seconds, subtitles rolled across the bottom of the screen.

"Hello, my name is Chairman Lan Guang," the man said. "Of what was formerly known as the People's Republic of China." The man seemed robotic. "The country, formerly of this name, is no more." When Cedric looked at Caren, she was not looking at the TV, but at him. She seemed to be watching his face, to see what surprised him and what didn't. "We have removed ourselves from the world because we have developed a new technology. Foods, water, energy, money, all are no longer necessary. Our scientists have developed a cure all, a wonderful machine that grants long, healthy life to those that use it. We petition the world to send us your sick, crippled, and aged; send us those who need a healing not previously known. Here, they will find health, happiness, and the freedom to live lives longer and fuller than previously imagined. This land is no longer a country and a government no longer exists so passports will not be necessary. We wish only to serve mankind. That is all."

The man just sat there for a few seconds in complete silence until the camera turned off. He didn't seem happy or relieved; he barely seemed to be there at all.

"What do you think?" Caren said. "Do you think it's true?"

"Of course not," Cedric said, more harshly than he meant to. "I mean, the man seemed like a robot. It was almost as if he didn't believe what he was reading."

Caren looked as if Cedric had struck her. He went to her and held her close before he'd even realized what he'd done. That video was hope for her, and maybe she had at least wanted to see Cedric hope for her too. He should have. He should have at least acted hopeful, maybe said he would see what he could learn at work, but he had been too hasty and he knew too much. He felt Caren push away from him.

"That's it for sure then, I guess," she said. "I thought I had dealt with it, you know," she looked up at Cedric. "But then I saw this and –"

She didn't finish her thought before burying her head in his shirt and crying as quietly as she could. Cedric hated the man in that video. He had used hope to hurt Caren and if that Guang guy had been in the room right then, Cedric would have killed him.

Part of Cedric, most of him actually, wished the video had been true. He wished he could just send Caren off to China and save her life. He would quit his job and go with them. They would live, happy and health – but none of it was true. It was a cruel joke. *Or a trap.*

It was obvious. The Umbra were luring people in, but it didn't make sense. They were luring the weak, sick, and the elderly. How would that help them? Caren pulled away from him gently and stared at the floor.

"I know you know more," she said. "And that you're not supposed to tell me, but I want to know what's going on."

Cedric didn't know what to say. He couldn't tell her; before now, she had never asked him.

"Honey, you know I can't," he said as he put his hand on her shoulder.

She shook it off.

"I've never asked before," she said. "But now, I don't have much time left and I want to know how to protect our children." Her gaze snapped from the floor to Cedric's eyes. He'd never seen her so scared or so determined. "I know that big things are happening, Cedric, and I know that you know what they are." She grabbed him by the shoulders as if he were a child. "Don't you want to keep us safe?"

They stared at each other for some time in silence. Her gaze never broke and blinking didn't seem to soften it at all.

"You will be safe," he said. "I just got word today that you and the kids have been cleared to move onto the base."

She did not seem moved. If anything, it made her more determined.

"No." The word hung in the air. "I'm not spending my last months in a strange government building." She pulled Cedric to his feet and walked to the back south window. "I want to look out and see that orange tree every day once I'm stuck in bed. I want to look around at the things that remind me of our children when they were just babies."

"I thought you wanted to be safe," Cedric started to shout but trailed off quietly, not wanting to wake Aaron.

"I do, Cedric." Her face softened. She seemed about to cry. "But if I'm going to leave this place that I love more than anything, just this once, you're going to have to tell me why."

Cedric sat down to think and Caren was quiet. She seemed pleased that he was even thinking about it. Cedric didn't know why he was. Telling her could lose him his clearance as well as his spot on the team. All it would take was one slip; the tiniest thing could tip them off that she knew something.

"Close the door," Cedric said.

Caren rushed to the door and back to the bed so fast she was winded by the time she sat back down. She got more anxious every second he didn't speak, but seemed unwilling to break the silence herself.

"We are being invaded just like China was," Cedric said. "And it's not a country or a virus, or any of the things you read online." He grabbed Caren's hands and looked into her eyes. "We're being invaded by another sentient life form." Cedric could see a million questions in Caren's eyes, but she just sat ready to listen on. "They move by water, and we think they come from the deep ocean. They've like nothing we've ever seen, and, from what we can tell, they toppled China without fighting a single battle."

Cedric was silent for some time. He knew it was a lot to take in. It seemed to hit Caren in waves. She got increasingly scared and clung to him tighter all the time.

"What do they want?" she said in a quiet, quivering voice.

"We don't know," Cedric said. "We just know that they take people and put them in these strange machines that make them relive their lives."

Caren nodded and sat silently for a while. Her face softened after a while and she looked up at Cedric and gave her best effort at a smile. Tears were in her eyes.

"Okay, honey." She kissed him lightly. "When are we moving onto the base?"

Cedric pulled her close and kissed her head.

"As soon as you want, honey," he said. "I'll find out how much we can bring and I'm sure they'll send some trucks to move us."

Caren nodded and kissed Cedric again on the lips as she pulled away and stood.

"Cedric," she said in that tone she had that told him she was about to say something very important. "I love you, and I love the kids more than anything."

Cedric rose and kissed her over and over again.

"I love you and the kids too, honey," he said. "We will be safe at the base, don't worry."

"I know," she said. "I know you'll keep them safe."

Cedric hated when she talked about herself as if she was gone already, but he let it go, held her close, and ran his fingers through her hair, wondering how many more times he'd be able to.

Ron

It had been a week since the Wall and Ron still couldn't bring himself to speak to Mr. Poole since he'd denied his request to stay at the Wall and look for his wife and daughter. He hadn't even thought about it, he'd just said no. *They had to be there. That Ming guy said 'all of the taken.'* Poole didn't even let us look. Ron held the pictures of Ellen and Aryana in his hand. He always kept them in the same hand, trying in his own little way to bring them together, if only in his mind.

He barely spoke to Captain Rosby either, but he had to talk to somebody and he was fairly certain that, at the moment, Captain Rosby was his only friend in China. He wondered why Rosby was so interested in him. Captain Rosby didn't talk about himself much, he just seemed to want to listen. Ron could tell that there was some pain or loss in Rosby's past that made him sympathetic, but he couldn't bring himself to ask.

They'd run into three groups of Umbra, including the big group that had been inside the Wall when they'd come looking for the machine. It had been brutal to watch the Rangers fight them. It was hand to hand with polyurethane batons and bare fists. The first time Ron saw them fight, he remembered how Mr. Ming had said that the Chinese called them children.

They had been so scared. He remembered looking at their faces – their eyeless, noseless, pitiful faces – as they held out their hands as if expecting magic, or nature, or God to hold the Rangers back, but nothing ever held them back. They beat and bludgeoned the little things to death. It was odd. At no point had Ron enjoyed watching the carnage even though those little things had taken his wife and daughter.

In the beginning, Captain Rosby had called the groups of Umbra detachments, but he stopped after the run-in at the Great Wall. He said that they weren't organized enough to be military, and that none of them seemed to be in charge of the others. He also said that, given all that, it was incredible how they seemed to move and work together. He hadn't talked about it much.

The things that scared Ron the most were the poles all over the place. They shot lightning back and forth sometimes and it made everything around them seem alien. They didn't belong and they made everything around them not belong too. The poles were a constant reminder of the state of things. Ron could never lose himself in the beautiful land or a sunset because the damn poles were always there, and that made Ron hate them even more.

Ron was pretty sure the Umbra scared Captain Rosby too, and he didn't look like somebody who had been scared much in his life. That the Umbra scared Captain Rosby scared Ron. What reason had the children given him to be afraid? They'd never put up a good fight, barely ever presented any challenge at all. Rubber and plastic seemed to defeat them easily. It had been eating at Ron a lot lately.

Nobody else seemed to see that something was bothering the Captain though. The men looked up to him too much and Mr. Poole didn't pay attention. He seemed content with the fact

that Rosby was a good soldier, and maybe that meant fear didn't matter. But Ron could see it – he saw it more and more every day. He had to know what it was all about.

When the Captain walked by, Ron grabbed him by the wrist and regretted it immediately. Ron could have sworn he hadn't blinked by the time Rosby had him by the thumb with his palm to the sky. It hurt so badly, but he released immediately. It was a reflex to him.

"Sorry," he said. "What do you want?"

Ron motioned for the Captain to lean in closer. He rolled his eyes and did so.

"Can I ask you something?" Ron said. "Privately?"

Rosby nodded.

"Pack it up, boys," he shouted. "I'm taking Mr. Bucks away from camp to relieve himself. I'll be back in five; this had all better be loaded by then."

The Rangers hopped to after a couple of chuckles about Ron having to be led to the bathroom. It was amazing to watch Captain Rosby give orders; something in his voice demanded obedience. Ron told the Captain, once, that if he gave an order to Mr. Poole he would do it. Rosby hadn't laughed or smiled, but his eyes lit up and Ron had come to know that was the same thing.

Once they were alone, behind a tree and bush, Rosby wasted no time.

"What's so important, Bucks?" he said.

Ron liked that Rosby called him by his last name; it made him feel as if he were one of the Captain's Rangers.

"I have something to ask you," he said hesitantly. "It's just been bothering me and –"

"Out with it, Bucks,"

"I just want to know what it is about the Umbra that scares you," Ron said. "From what I've seen, you have no reason to be, and me and Mr. Poole's agreement says I go where he goes and know what –"

"What makes you say I'm afraid?" he said.

But he didn't say it as Ron had expected. He seemed genuinely intrigued. He wasn't mad or offended.

"You look at them funny, I guess," Ron said. "All I know is you're thinking something every time we run into them and you've never told anyone."

Captain Rosby's eyes lit up and he tried his best to smile.

"I'm no more scared of them than I am of any other enemy I meet in the field," he said. "The Umbra confuse me though."

Ron didn't understand. The Umbra were evil little creatures that kidnapped people and held them prisoner. They were trying to enslave mankind, rule the world. What was confusing about that?

"I don't see what's –"

"No, nobody does," he said coolly. "None of the men have seen it." He looked at Ron with the most intense mix of fear and confusion Ron had seen. "A few of them, before I gave 'em the last shot," he said. "They smiled." It was as if Rosby was reliving a nightmare. "It's like they're letting us kill them." Rosby was getting louder so Ron moved to quiet him but was grabbed by both shoulders. "They got China." At most, Rosby's face was an inch from Ron's nose. "They got China and we barely saw it coming. They're knocking down country after country." He seemed suddenly aware of his volume and peered around the tree to make sure nobody was listening. "Whatever they're using to do this, whatever technology or thing they have, it's not here." He released Ron, straightened the neckline of his jump suit, and began

calming down. “That’s what I’m scared of. That we’re here playing soldier on a bunch of practice dummies while whatever it is we need to be fighting moves further away.”

For some time after Rosby walked away, Ron stood frozen. He’d never even thought about that. 1.2 billion people in a day, a week, what could do that? Rosby was right; whatever it was, they hadn’t seen it yet, and Ron wasn’t sure if he wanted to.

Ron gathered himself and walked back to the camp; or what had been the camp. By the time he got there, everything was back in the trucks and everyone seemed to be waiting on him. They were always waiting on him. He could never do anything fast enough, but he’d stopped letting it bother him. It was an order from Captain Rosby.

As soon as he closed the door to the humvee, Mr. Poole was chattering to him, knowing that Ron had no intention of answering.

“I don’t know if you were in the camp when I told everyone,” Mr. Poole said. “But we’re heading home.” Ron could feel Mr. Poole staring at him; he was always staring, trying to get answers that people wouldn’t give. “Just got the news from the pilots that came for the two Chinese nationals we detained.”

Captain Rosby stared at the road in that way of his that meant he had questions he wanted to ask. Ron wondered if Mr. Poole had picked up on Rosby’s mannerisms as he had or if he just enjoyed torturing the man. It was probably the latter; Mr. Poole seemed to take pleasure in lording whatever power he had over whomever he could. Ron hated him more every day they got further from the Wall, further from his family.

“Did they say why we’ve been ordered home, sir?” Captain Rosby said.

Mr. Poole did not answer immediately. He must have been as shocked by Rosby’s inquisitiveness as Ron was. His voice was different somehow, less steady. Maybe he was thinking about the thing he was scared of, the thing they hadn’t seen yet.

“All I know is that the Umbra have begun overt operations.” Mr. Poole was staring at Rosby and clearly frustrated by the lack of visual feedback. “I don’t see why they need us though. They could outfit security guards with the gear your team has and they could beat the Umbra back.” Mr. Poole barely took a breath before adding, “No offense to our men.”

Captain Rosby nodded, but something in his eyes was laughing at Mr. Poole’s use of the word *our*. Rosby was Mr. Poole’s man, the rest were his. It was a minor distinction, but one Rosby had made known to Ron more than once.

The truck in the rear honked, then the other humvee behind Rosby. More Umbra. Rosby tried his radio as he always did, just to make sure. Only static. He had the vehicle stopped and was out of the car; Ron wasn’t sure which actually happened first.

Ron hurried out behind Mr. Poole. They’d both learned not to stay in the humvee. The last time the Umbra had come, they’d lured the Rangers into the trees, then the vehicles all started up and drove on their own. They hadn’t gone a hundred feet before Rosby hit them all with an electro-magnetic pulse from the Star-Trek-looking rifle he always had slung across his back. Ron was pretty sure that was the day Rosby had started getting scared.

Ron and Mr. Poole were just walking into the trees when they heard the scream. It sounded inhuman, not in tone or pitch but because any person in that kind of pain shouldn’t be conscious. It seemed to echo in and of itself. It was as if it took every pitch, every vocal cord to make that noise and, for a second, neither Ron nor Mr. Poole moved.

Then they were running. Ron hadn’t run like that in years. He was jumping stumps, hurdling downed trees. They came to the clearing where the Rangers were finishing off the Umbra.

Captain Rosby had one by the neck and seemed to be trying to cram its head into its torso with his bare hands. He'd never looked so mad. He wasn't fighting, he was punishing, brutalizing. Brain, teeth, and blue fluid splashed everywhere.

Then Rosby knelt and snatched something off one of the Umbra corpses. It was a big Umbra. As Ron got closer, he realized it wasn't an Umbra at all. It was one of the Rangers, burned beyond recognition, rubber suit melted to his body, skin falling off the bone.

Ron wanted to ask what had happened, but he looked over at the Umbra with its head smashed into its torso and decided against it. He was glad when Mr. Poole spoke up though.

"What in the hell happened here?" he said. "How did this happen? What did they use?"

"Nothing," Captain Rosby said. "When we came into the clearing, all six of the Umbra stood in a line with their hand on the shoulder of the one to their right and their foot on the foot of the one to their left. The middle one had its hand out." Rosby took a long pause and when Mr. Poole started to question him further, Rosby glanced at him and silence continued. "Baker walked toward them," he said. "He was taunting them, dancing around," Rosby looked over at the Umbra he'd beaten the head off of. "Then there was a flash and he was on the ground melting in his own skin." He turned and grabbed Mr. Poole by the shoulders. "It shot lightning out of its hand, Poole, a big thick bolt, I could feel the heat at the tree line and my hairs are still standing up. It melted him right through his thermal."

Mr. Poole didn't seem comfortable being held that way by Captain Rosby, but he seemed to know better than to try to free himself.

"Then, Captain?"

Captain Rosby seemed to regain control of himself. He released Mr. Poole and took a quick breath.

"The Umbra all stood still, sir." Rosby's eyes were distant. "They didn't defend themselves. They never raised a hand."

Lan Guang

Chairman Lan had barely left the child since that day on the street. He was afraid that, despite Mr. Baynes' insistence that the live specimen would be of dramatic importance to the American government, an 'accident' would befall it at the hands of some of the security personnel looking to avenge their friends.

He was constantly amazed by its calmness. Since it had awakened, all it did was sit, usually by itself, or go on deck to look out at the horizon; though, usually only at night. It seemed acutely aware of how the rest of the crew regarded its presence.

Being on a ship reminded the Chairman of Admiral Hosuka and he was often sad. Many times, he imagined what his old friend's last moments had been like. He wished he had had time to ask Zhou. But maybe it was better not knowing. He liked to think of Admiral Hosuka forming his men into ranks, preparing to be boarded; fighting until there were no bullets left in his gun and charging the enemy line with his saber in hand. He wondered if the child knew.

He had tried to talk to it a couple of times, but could never find any words. Most times, he left, but on a couple occasions, he had lingered and the two had existed together in silence looking into the night time of the Pacific.

Chairman Lan could not get a read on what it thought, what it felt, if it felt, but he was determined to break through. The children had confused him long enough. He found his way to its chamber, but when he got there, he was stopped by guards at the door.

"Sorry, Mr. Lan," one of the sailors said. "Admiral's orders, nobody can see it."

Chairman Lan was shocked.

"Why not?" he said. "The child has never been off limits before."

The men smiled at each other as they always did when he referred to it as 'the child.' They didn't have a better name for it, but for some reason they deemed that one funny.

"We haven't had any radio signal since we entered U.S. waters," the guard said. "The Admiral thinks this little guy has something to do with it, but he won't talk."

Chairman Lan rubbed the bridge of his nose. Admiral Tubbs didn't listen any better than his sailors.

"It can't speak," Chairman Lan said. "It has no vocal cords."

"Tell it to the Admiral," the man said as he and the other guard chuckled.

Chairman Lan hated being laughed at, but it seemed inevitable when you're the party leader of an ex country. Not much left to respect.

With as much dignity as he could, he turned calmly, and walked off toward the Admiral's quarters.

When he found the Admiral's quarters, he knocked and entered. Admiral Tubbs was reading a report and, for a second, Chairman Lan could have sworn he saw Hosuka. He had always been so anal about his reports. Chairman Lan couldn't help but smile. Then he noticed the Admiral was staring at him.

"Can I help you, Mr. ex-Chairman?" he said.

He seemed to love calling Lan the ex-Chairman. The joy he took from the phrase made Chairman Lan quite certain of the Admiral's views on Communism.

"Yes, Admiral, I believe you can." Chairman Lan stepped forward and bowed slightly. "I would like to speak to the child."

The Admiral stared at him as if he had been insulted by the question.

"Mr. Lan." The Admiral rose and sauntered about. "If I wanted you to have access to that thing, my order would have been, 'Nobody can see it, except that nice, ex-Chairman fella.'"

Admiral Tubbs had his hands behind his back and was hunched in the way an elementary school teacher hunches when teaching a young child an obvious lesson.

Chairman Lan had to exert all of his effort to hide his anger.

"Quite right, Admiral," he said. "I was just coming to offer my services, me being the only person on this ship who has ever spoken to the children."

Chairman Lan had to conceal his smile as the bluster and sarcasm drained from Admiral Tubbs' face. The Admiral quickly turned and walked back to his desk, apparently wanting to continue the conversation without having to look at Chairman Lan.

"Why didn't you just say so?" Admiral Tubbs said. "We've been trying to get info out of that damned little thing for hours now." He shot a sly smile at Chairman Lan. "It's pretty unresponsive to our, uh, inquisitive style."

Chairman Lan wanted to curse the man – to berate and humiliate him as he would have any such person beneath him when he had power. Having learned what he'd been doing to the child, he was surprised at how much he hated this man.

Then, an odd thought crept into his brain. He hadn't hated the children this much the entire time he was held captive. The thought shook him. He had to leave, to think, to speak to it.

"I'm sure I will obtain the information you require." Chairman Lan was hardly looking at the Admiral anymore. "If you would provide a written order or something passable for the guards at the door."

Chairman Lan could see that his demeanor was confusing the Admiral who was probably chalking it up to some sort of racist, Zen Buddhist perception, but he was relieved when the Admiral took up a pen and wrote a short order on a piece of his own stationary.

"Thank you." Chairman Lan bowed. "I'll come back when I have your answers."

Admiral Tubbs just nodded and dismissed him with a wave of his hand.

Once Chairman Lan was down the hall a little ways, he opened the order and nearly laughed as he read it.

Let him in.

Admiral Samuel Tubbs

As he got closer to the child's chambers, he felt nervousness begin to shake in his knees and hands. What would he ask it? Would he like the answers? For a moment he was scared, but then he was angry and ashamed of himself.

Hosuka would have done it. He would have never flinched. If Zhou were here, he would do it. He was more like Hosuka than he was like the Chairman, and the Chairman had always thought him better for it. Chairman Lan just hoped he was better at faking bravery than he was at actually having it.

The guards rolled their eyes as they saw him coming again.

"We already told you –"

Chairman Lan thrust the paper into the guard's hand, smiled his most obnoxiously friendly smile, and waited for them to frown and open the door, which they promptly did.

He looked around the room for a second. It was very spare. Even more-so than Chairman Lan's own bunk room. He had been in Mr. Baynes' quarters; they were much more comfortably furnished. He was getting comfortable; feeling more relaxed than he'd anticipated, but then the door closed behind him.

No turning back. He started working his eyes around the room in the direction of the child. When the bolts and paint of the ship walls started bringing back the memories of his last meeting with Hosuka, his eyes went straight to the child.

"Hello," he said. "I don't know if you remember me, but –"

He broke off when he noticed how it was looking at him. It was a strange, knowing look, as if it had something to tell him.

After a few seconds he smiled at his forgetfulness.

"Of course," Chairman Lan said as he pulled his dead phone out of his pocket. "I hope this will do."

The child reached out its hand and accepted the phone from Chairman Lan. It removed the back and pressed the exposed battery against its hand and angled the screen toward Chairman Lan. The power button flashed green.

I remember you, Chairman Lan Guang of what was formerly the People's Republic of China, appeared on the phone screen. Your wife is Hihito Shoshona, Lan Shoshona since your marriage, and your son is Lieutenant Lan Zhou.

Chairman Lan was curious about how the child had obtained this information, but he had other answers he was charged with obtaining.

“Why did you save me?” Chairman Lan said without thinking.

Chairman Lan started to rephrase, but the child smiled gently and words appeared on the screen.

You are alive, it said. It would be a sad waste for something alive as you and I to cease to be so. The screen cleared, but then lit up again, almost as an afterthought. **I am glad my efforts were successful.**

“But you killed those other men?” Chairman Lan said. “You crushed them with a car.”

It leaned forward as it filled the screen with words, as if imparting a personal secret.

Those willing to take the life of another should expect theirs taken in return or in defense.

The child stared at Chairman Lan as he read, as if it expected to learn his response from his face rather than his voice. He wondered if it could see the anger on his face.

“What did China do then?” he said more harshly than he’d intended. “What lives did we take that warranted the loss of hundreds of millions of lives?”

It reached out its hand as if to soothe him, but he recoiled and pointed at the phone. He wanted an answer.

We killed no one, it said. All those you think are lost live on, forever, in our machines. We seek to live symbiotically with humans.

None dead? It had to be a lie. To conquer China without taking a life – impossible.

“Symbiotically?” Chairman Lan said. “I think you misunderstand the word. You take us from our homes, our families. You –”

The screen flashed off then on again, blue, then red, then green. **We wish to grant you immortality and save the Earth from you as well as save you from yourselves.** It leaned its head down as if it wanted to make eye contact. **We wish to take our civilization to new heights. We will cover this planet. We will grow and explore far beyond what your species ever could, and we will take you with us. Mankind will be at the heart of all of our endeavors, powering our ships, our weapons, our very bodies. The things we will achieve together –**

“Do you think I’m stupid? I –”

The phone rang and vibrated, clearly meant to interrupt.

On the contrary, Chairman Lan, we believe mankind is exceptionally intelligent, but you are also exceptionally misguided and short sighted.

Chairman Lan started to reply, but the phone rang and vibrated even more violently this time.

It seems unlikely that these are the questions you were permitted entry to ask. It turned its shoulder to reveal a section of missing flesh. The wound seemed to have sealed itself with some strange, light blue material. **They are certainly not the questions the others asked.**

“Why are you trying to change the subject?” Chairman Lan loomed over the child. It did not flinch, but the change in its expression was distinct.

For your benefit, it said with the same apologetic look it had the day on the street.

Chairman Lan softened immediately and sat down. He could not believe he’d shown such rage toward something that had saved his life. He made sure his next question was softer.

“How is it for my benefit?”

The answers to the questions you ask will anger you. The words on the phone seemed to tremble and fuzz. It was as if the phone was crying. **Just know that you cannot stop us, but also that we mean you no harm. We only do what must be done.**

Chairman Lan had not expected such chilling words, especially delivered in that way. It was as if the child was sorrier it had to come to this than for anything else; as if mankind had had its chance and failed.

“Is that why you’re jamming the radios?” Chairman Lan said. “Are the others coming?”

It looked helpless and sad as it made the words appear on the screen.

I am not creating any interference for your radios. It seemed to hesitate, as if deciding if it could even tell the Chairman the answer. **That is my brothers, but it is not them who are coming, it is this ship.**

Chairman Lan was confused. The ship was headed to a port in California.

“What do you mean?” he said. “The Admiral said we would be seeing the lights of the harbor by midnight.”

The look on its face as Chairman Lan mentioned the lights said it all, but every second the words didn’t appear on the phone, he hoped more that he was wrong.

There will be no lights, it said. **I am sorry.**

Chairman Lan hoped that it was lying, but somehow he knew it was not. Then, like many other times since that day in the street when he’d agreed to go with Mr. Baynes, he wished he’d returned to the complex. He wished he’d just stayed with Zhou and gotten every second together until the children did what they were going to do. Now, it would happen anyway, but he would not be able to be with his son.

“Will they take us?” Chairman Lan said. “When?”

It stared at him with that apologetic look again, but the phone did not ring, it did not vibrate, and no words appeared on the screen. But that was all Chairman Lan needed to gather that the answers were ‘yes’ and ‘soon.’

Chairman Lan extended his hand, the child took it, and they shook.

“Thank you,” Chairman Lan said. “My friend.”

The child gave a smile much softer and more natural than usual as it handed the phone back to him.

When he walked out of the room, he asked one of the guards where he might find the Admiral and, per their instructions, headed to the cafeteria.

When he had gotten a short distance down the hallway, and there was nobody around, he felt his phone vibrating. It was a text message from ‘a friend.’

Thank you, my friend, I enjoyed our talk. Know that it is men like you that make some of us question whether this is the correct course of action. You are a testament to humanity. Know, also, that you will be laid to eternity beside your son and wife. This I can promise you.

He clicked the phone shut and stood in the hallway for a moment. He thought about Admiral Hosuka, one of many friends the children had taken. It scared him that he was beginning to understand them, to see a semblance of humanity in their actions. He wondered if he and the child in that room were really friends. Should he tell the Admiral what lay ahead?

As he put the phone in his pocket and set out for Admiral Tubbs, he thought only of Hosuka. “Once more into the breach, my dear, old friend.”

Ming Han

Word around the facility was that the blackouts were spreading; that they were coming further inland every day. Ming Han tried asking people, but nobody would tell him anything for certain. Ever since the government people had gotten all the information Ming Han and Chun Kai could give, nobody at the base paid much attention to Ming Han, but some of the military personnel talked to Chun Kai, especially since he'd started training with them. He'd even done some training with the Black Seals.

Ming Han had tried, but had injured his ankle badly; he was off crutches but still walked with a noticeable limp. He was glad he still had Chun Kai to talk to, but he didn't know how much longer that would last. He constantly feared that Kai would be absorbed into a unit and he would be left alone.

"Do you think it is true?" Chun Kai said. "Are the blackouts really spreading?"

Ming Han could see the fear in his eyes. Chun Kai had been able to recall most of his life; he knew he was twenty-eight, that he had been Chinese Special Forces on his way to a promotion, and that the Umbra had taken his friends one night on a beach, but he still treated some things as a child would.

The memory of the night on the beach had been the hardest. They both knew what it meant. It meant that his friends had probably been on the cots right beside him the night Ming Han woke him up. If they had thought to awaken more, some of them would be with them right now. Chun Kai blamed himself for not remembering and Ming Han blamed himself for being too much a coward to save more people. Still, each tried to console the other.

"It is probably true," Ming Han said. "From what you've told me, that's exactly how it happened in the cities."

Chun Kai nodded. For all the growing he'd done, his expressions seemed so childlike sometimes. His fears, joys, and hurts were amplified as they were in children. It confused Ming Han, but usually made him smile as well. Chun Kai seemed to look up to him even though Ming Han was actually a year younger. It was odd to everyone else, but they didn't know any other way to interact.

It was a beautiful day, so the two had decided to walk outside. It smelled different here than it did in China. Ming Han thought it was due to less pollution, Chun Kai said it was because there were different flowers.

"Do you think the children enjoy the smell of flowers?" Chun Kai said.

The question was strange because it struck Ming Han as something Kai would say during one of his child-like moments, but he said it in the tone of a man, with the force of a man, and Ming Han felt he had to answer it like a man.

"I think the only thing they enjoy is destruction," Ming Han said as he picked a small, pink flower and crumpled the petals in his hand. "I hope that Dr. Bryce is right. I hope the children can be stopped."

Chun Kai shrugged the way a man does when he doesn't want to get into an argument. He had been doing things like that a lot lately and Ming Han was confused.

"Kai, what do you think about the children?" Ming Han said. "Something about them has changed in your eyes."

Chun Kai stared through the fence at the trees. His face was the one a man makes when he's about to talk about something he'd rather not; placid, but bothered around the eyes in the most faintly noticeable way.

"I'm not sure," he said, still not looking at Ming Han. "They took my friends, my family; they took my country, but I can't bring myself to hate them."

Ming Han was speechless. Kai had been in the machines. He'd been turned into a man-child, used as a glorified battery.

"How can you not?" Ming Han said.

"I'm still alive," Chun Kai said. "And I was alive in that machine, or at least I thought I was, and isn't that all that matters? Thinking you're alive?"

He wasn't making statements anymore. It was clear he wanted Ming Han to agree with him, needed him to.

"I think living was the stuff the machine made you remember," Ming Han said. "If they put a baby in there what would happen?" Ming Han looked over at Chun Kai. "Darkness, that's what."

"You never felt it," Chun Kai said, seemingly to the wind. "I felt my mother hold me again. I felt my baby sister in my arms before she was sent away." Chun Kai turned to Ming Han. "Before I went into the machine I'm pretty sure I had forgotten those things, but the children gave them back. How can I hate something that gave me the best parts of my family back?"

Ming Han didn't know what to say. In that instant, he wished he'd never pulled Chun Kai from the machine, and he was pretty sure that, in his own way, Chun Kai was saying the same thing.

He hadn't expected this when he'd awakened that morning and found Chun Kai to go for a walk, and if he had, he never thought he would find himself questioning his own feelings about the children.

"I've missed my mother since my eyes opened and I saw you standing over me," Chun Kai said. "She was tucking me in, giving me a kiss on the forehead, when everything went black." He put his hand on Ming Han's shoulder and tried his best to smile. "The next thing I remember, my eyes opened and you were there."

Ming Han tried to smile, but did a poorer job of it than Kai had. He wondered what he should do. Should he say he's sorry? Should he give him a hug; leave him alone?

The tension was broken when the alarms began to sound. *Great, another drill.*

"Proceed to your evacuation stations," the voice boomed over the loudspeaker. "This is not a drill. Repeat, this is not a drill."

Both Ming Han and Chun Kai took off running. Ming Han could see that Kai was running slowly so as not to get too far ahead. He smiled for a second, but then he heard the crash of the gates behind him.

"Go!" the man on the machine gun shouted as the humvee that had just flattened the gate flew by them. "Ten rollers escorting a squid, twelve clicks. Move!"

Ming Han didn't know exactly what rollers were, but he knew twelve clicks was nothing to the children.

When Chun Kai heard squid, he was out of sight in a matter of seconds. *That's the machine from the beach that he always talks about.* Chun Kai had told him the story a couple times, and Ming Han was in no hurry to see any part of it for real, but it was happening at that very moment. He was nearly out of breath, and his ankle hurt so badly he would have consented to the embarrassment of being carried. He looked around at the military personnel as they ran past him. None showed any concern for him, and all were afraid – so afraid.

As he was running for the helicopters and convoy vehicles, hoping in vain to catch up to Chun Kai, the Black Seals were walking the other way. They were the Special Forces outfitted to fight the children. They wore full body, rubber suits, carried plastic guns, plastic batons, EMP grenades, and the special EMP guns that looked like something from a movie.

The rest of the military ran from the children, but the Black Seals were the ones who killed the little bastards. They walked in like juggernauts and took out whole regiments as if it were a training exercise. Ming Han didn't understand why the men in charge didn't put the Black Seals on the offensive. He knew there had to be a reason; he just wished someone would tell him what it was. What did the children have that still scared them?

Ming Han was barely breathing by the time he saw Chun Kai running through the crowd back toward him, and his ankle was nearly unbearable.

"Sorry," he said. "I heard —"

"I know," Ming Han said. "It's fine; just get us to the helicopter before it fills up."

Chun Kai laughed.

"Sorry old man," he said. "The choppers are all gone; we'll have to hitch a ride on a transport."

Ming Han smiled as much as he could manage. Riding an unknown number of hours on a bench in the back of a transport truck wasn't anything he'd wanted to do when he'd awoken that morning, but it was better than being captured by the children. He wondered if Chun Kai felt the same.

Chun Kai was barely jogging to make sure he didn't get too far ahead of Ming Han. The Black Seals were the only people around anymore. All of the normal military was nowhere to be seen. Ming Han looked at all of them, but none of them ever looked back.

When they got to the lot where the vehicles were kept, the fence was locked. Ming Han tried to force it open. He shook and kicked it, but then Chun Kai placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and pointed.

On the other side of the chain fence, in the distance, Ming Han could see the last truck in the convoy. *They left without us?*

"Why?" Ming Han said. "How could they —"

"Evacuation protocol," Chun Kai said. "They load until they see nobody coming, four minutes tops, and they take roll on the move, not to get stragglers, but to see who's lost."

He said this in an eerily even tone. It was as if he'd already accepted it, expected it even.

"I'm sorry," Ming Han said. "If you hadn't come back for me, you —"

"I knew they would probably be gone when I came back." Chun Kai was smiling with his mouth, but his eyes had an intense focus, as if he were listening to or seeing something far off. "Follow me. I know where they keep the black suits."

Ming Han was shocked. He didn't want to fight the children, to see the rollers and the squid.

"Kai, my ankle," he said, fumbling for excuses. "We'll never get there. We should just —"

"Han," Chun Kai said as he put both of his hands on Ming Han's shoulders and stared into his eyes. "The shelter is not the safest place, and neither is trying to walk after the convoy."

Ming Han tried to speak, but he was in awe of the man before him. This was Captain Chun Kai, a grown man, courageous and calm. Suddenly, he felt like the child of the pair.

"How many of the Black Seals have fallen to the Umbra?" Chun Kai said.

Ming Han knew that he already knew the answer.

"None," Ming Han said.

Chun Kai smiled. "So would you rather be with them, in a suit that makes you untouchable, or in a bunker cowering in the corner?"

Ming Han was still scared. He thought once they'd left China he would never have to see another one of those deformed little creatures again, and he couldn't imagine what their weapons were like, but Chun Kai was right and he followed him to the Black Seal's barracks.

Inside, everything was absolutely pristine. Dress shoes were shined, everything was perfectly folded and hung in the small lockers, and the beds were made. Chun Kai started rifling through the lockers, looking for spare suits. There were none to be found.

"All of them are issued two suits," Chun Kai said, confused. "Where do they keep the spares?"

Part of Ming Han hoped they didn't find the suits. Even though Chun Kai was right that they would be safer with the Black Seals, he didn't know how much sleep he wanted to lose to the nightmares of the children and their machines.

Suddenly, Ming Han knew where the suits were. He was about to tell Kai, but he stopped short. He could just keep it to himself. If they couldn't find the suits, Kai would be fine hiding in the bunker. Out of nowhere, he heard his father's voice in his head. He hadn't thought of him in a long time. Instantly, he was ashamed. He had never grieved him the way he'd wanted. He'd never lit incense or said any words, and now he further shamed him through cowardice.

"They aren't spares," Ming Han said. "They're alternates."

Chun Kai still seemed confused.

"Let's check the laundry," Ming Han said as he hobbled toward the door.

Chun Kai jogged in front of him and opened the door. As Ming Han walked by, he felt the man's hand on his shoulder.

"Thank you," he said.

Ming Han nodded and hobbled on.

The laundry facility was close by. The suits were hanging behind the partition, ready for pickup.

"Find one that fits," Chun Kai said as he hopped the divider and started flipping through the suits.

Ming Han quickly gathered that, one way or another, they were all too big for him. He grabbed the smallest one he could find and started putting it on. He had barely started when Chun Kai stopped him.

"What are you doing?" he said. "You can't put it on over your clothes." He pointed to a second rack that had some rubber undergarments on it. "Cloth can catch fire under the rubber because of the heat transfer of the shocks. Grab one of these; they're thermal to counter the heat transfer."

Ming Han watched how Kai put his gear on and followed suit. The two zipped each other up and walked out of the laundry facility.

"We don't have weapons," Ming Han said.

Chun Kai started bouncing around, sparing with the air. Even though his face was covered by the rubber hood and goggles, Ming Han could tell he was smiling.

"All right," Ming Han said. "Well, I still don't have any weapons."

Chun Kai laughed.

"Don't worry," he said. "We aren't going to fight anything. We'll just hang back until the fighting is over and travel with the Seals to the next base."

Ming Han liked that plan, but something about how Kai sounded, how he walked and looked around, made him question whether or not he would actually stick to it.

Suddenly, Chun Kai froze. He was staring at something. Ming Han followed his gaze. It was a woman. She was in a white gown, like what people in hospitals wore. She was bald, but Ming Han could see that she was attractive. She was walking in the direction that the Black Seals had gone. She seemed to stumble and sway, but she did not appear lost.

Ming Han found himself limping toward this woman. After a few seconds, Chun Kai ran past him.

“Ma’am, where are you going?” Chun Kai said. “Why didn’t you evacuate?”

When she turned to face them, something in her expression terrified Ming Han. She was pale and gaunt, but she smiled and her eyes seemed to glisten in the way that they did when someone cried happy tears.

“I’m going to sleep,” she said.

“What is your name?” Ming Han said. “Is there anyone else who stayed behind with you?”

The woman smiled, shook her head, and turned to keep walking. Chun Kai grabbed her.

“Miss, please go –”

“Mrs,” she said. “Mrs. Mankins.”

Ming Han had heard that name before, but he couldn’t place it.

“Okay, Mrs. Mankins,” Chun Kai said. “Please go back to the bunker. We’ll come get you when it’s safe.”

“No,” Mrs. Mankins said, still smiling. “I’m going to sleep. They said they can make me better.”

Something in Chun Kai’s face said he understood, but Ming Han was completely lost.

“Are you sick, Mrs. Mankins?” Chun Kai said in a completely different tone, totally devoid of force.

“Cancer,” was all she said. Sadness flashed in her eyes, but the happiness returned when she started talking again. “None of that matters now. I’m going to get better.”

She was pointing in the direction the Black Seals had gone, the direction of the children.

“Come with us,” Chun Kai said. “We’ll walk with you.”

“Thank you,” the woman said as she kissed the rubber mask that covered Chun Kai’s cheek.

Ming Han moved to object, but Chun Kai waved him away, and in that one motion, Ming Han knew he would not understand – could not understand – what the two of them seemed to know so well.

They didn’t walk very far before they heard the shouting. Something in it wasn’t right. It sounded scared, not victorious. The voices seemed frenzied. Han and Kai looked at each other and began walking a little faster. Mrs. Mankins hurried along beside them, never letting go of Chun Kai’s arm.

As they got closer, Ming Han could make out some of the shouting.

“Form up..... circles..... on me, on me.....”

Chun Kai must have heard it too because he started running so fast that Mrs. Mankins couldn’t keep up. She let go of his arm and ran behind him, right next to Ming Han who was limping as fast as he could. She grabbed his arm.

Ming Han could see Chun Kai enter a clearing and freeze. It was as if he'd hit a wall, the end of something, and was looking at the nothingness that existed beyond it. When Ming Han entered the clearing, he saw it too.

They were huge, ten of them – giant metal bodies, all about five meters high. They didn't look like robots or suits. They were smooth, sleek. It was as if they had been grown, not made, but he could still see the child at the core of each of them. It was some sort of clear capsule in the chest of each suit.

Behind the giant metal suits was a big metal pole. It seemed to glow. A bolt shot from it. It went back to another pole just like it. It jumped again to another pole. There were three of them, in a triangle and the lightning kept jumping between them.

"On me," one of the Black Seals yelled. It snapped Ming Han out of his trance.

The man in the front raised his EMP gun and fired. The metal suit in the front stiffened and began to wobble, but just as it was falling, a bolt shot from the pole and hit the gleaming body. It moved like it was alive – quick, agile, flexible. It caught itself.

At first, none of the Black Seals moved. Everyone stood, just staring at the suit as it climbed back to its feet, but it didn't come forward, did not advance. It just held its ground as if waiting for something.

Ming Han saw a shadow in the corner of his eye, but didn't pay any attention. Then, Mrs. Mankins was walking in front of him – quickly, moving through the crowd of Black Seals almost invisibly. None of them noticed her. They just looked up at the big metal bodies.

He thought he should chase her, bring her back, but he couldn't move. He didn't know if he really even wanted to. When she stood at the feet of the shiny, metal creature, the Black Seals all looked at her, all at once, as if they'd rehearsed it. Chun Kai did too. Then he looked where she had been, as if it could be some other woman in a hospital gown standing out there.

She got to her knees and put up her hands.

"Make me better," she shouted. "Make me better. I don't want to die."

None of the metal behemoths moved.

"My name is Caren," she yelled, as if it was her name they were waiting for. "Caren Mankins." She began to cry. "Make me better," she in a softer, defeated voice.

No sooner had she finished her sentence than the giant suit collapsed into a ball. It happened fast. Ming Han couldn't even see how it folded together, or if it fused or molded. There were no seams, but it was a ball, and the front folded open.

A child stepped out, and the Black Seals raised their weapons. The child raised its hand, seeming to both ask and demand that they not fire. It reached toward Mrs. Mankins. It was so slow, so deliberate, so gentle.

Suddenly, it grabbed the back of her neck. She went limp for an instant, then she stood, shielding the child. Ming Han hobbled forward behind Chun Kai.

"Hello," Mrs. Mankins said in a voice that was not her own. It seemed robotic, mechanical, contrived. "We are envoy for our society; the Umbra, the children, monsters, bastards – we have many names."

When they'd finally pushed their way to the front of the crowd, Ming Han could see her face. Her eyelids were open, but her eyes rolled around beneath them, and her jaw moved spastically when she spoke. It was ghastly. Ming Han's skin crawled.

"We do not want to harm you, but we will not sustain any more casualties." The volume and projection of the voice that came from Mrs. Mankins seemed impossible. It filled the clearing, the woods. It seemed to fill the world, as if God was talking. "Surrender, as this woman

has. We offer immortality and safety. If you do not surrender, you will be struck down this day. Our resolution to use non-lethal force has reached its end. Our patience is wearing thin. What say you?"

Silence filled the forest just as fully as the voice that was not Mrs. Mankins'. For what seemed like far too long, nobody moved. Ming Han thought it would get tired of waiting for an answer and destroy them all.

Ming Han caught some movement and turned his gaze to the far left side of the crowd. One of the Black Seals must have thrown something or raised a weapon, but Ming Han wasn't fast enough to catch all of the action. All he saw was one of the massive suits pounce and crush the man where he stood. The other Black Seals raised their weapons, but they did not fire.

"All are free to make their own decisions," the voice boomed from Mrs. Mankins. "None will be punished for this man's decision." The silence was exaggerated by the depth and projection of the voice that echoed away from them. "Surrender or die."

Again, crushing silence surrounded Ming Han. It was unbearable. Some of the Black Seals raised their hands, dropped their weapons, and walked forward. Chun Kai started walking and Ming Han grabbed his shoulder.

"No," Ming Han said. "It's a trap."

Chun Kai took off his mask and smiled his surest smile. "It's not."

He shrugged off Ming Han's hand and walked forward, but then he turned back.

"It's not dying," he said. "I've been in that machine. You live, you do it all. I was happy, really happy. It's better than dying." Chun Kai held out his hand. "Please, come."

Ming Han didn't know what to do. Who was he to tell Kai what he'd experienced in the machine? Ming Han didn't know if he agreed with Kai. Was reliving your life living? Was existing like that any better than ceasing to exist?

Chun Kai was smiling, looking at Ming Han. He expected something. He expected him to come, as if it was the only choice. It was not.

"I'm sorry, Kai." Ming Han placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I can't come with you."

Chun Kai looked deeply hurt and confused, but he would get over it. He had eternity. Ming Han hobbled forward as quickly as his ankle would allow.

"Dreaming is not immortality," he shouted as he grabbed an EMP sidearm as well as one of the plastic guns from one of the Black Seals.

He fired the EMP and the gun at Mrs. Mankins. He saw her fall, and he knew the bullet would hit his mark, the child behind her, but then everything was dark. One of the metal bodies turn into a blur, and then the sun was blocked and a big blur coming his way. He hoped Chun Kai would see – this was living.

Cedric

The convoy drove for six hours straight before it stopped. Cedric pushed his way out of the SUV, past John and Deputy Director Hastings. If he had knocked them down, he wouldn't have stopped. There had been no radios, no contact between cars. He had no word on Caren or the children. He knew they were fine, there had been evacuation drills twice a week, but Nora and Aaron were probably scared. He had to see them.

He scanned the faces in ever crowd, asked officers, role callers, everyone. He was almost to the back of the convoy, thinking he'd missed them because it was getting dark, by the time Aaron came sprinting from a crowd and grabbed his leg. Nora wasn't far behind.

"Daddy," Aaron said. "Where were you? The sirens were so loud and everyone was yelling."

Cedric picked up his son and held him tight. It felt good to have Aaron hold him so tight, to need him. There was a gentle tug on his waist band. Nora.

"Hello sweetie," Cedric said as he ran his fingers through her hair and pulled her to his side. "Did you take good care of your brother?"

She didn't look up. It was as if she wasn't hearing anything he was saying. He swung Aaron around to his back for a piggy-back ride. He giggled and Cedric bent down to look into his daughter's eyes.

"Is everything okay, honey?" he said.

She seemed surprised when their eyes met, as if he'd appeared from nowhere. She didn't smile or cry. She just extended her hand to his and placed something in it. It was a small, folded piece of paper – three small, folded pieces of paper. Cedric was confused. He glanced at the paper, then back at Nora. She didn't look eager, anxious, or worried. All he could gather from her look was that she wanted him to open it.

Dear Cedric,

I love you all so much. I know I haven't said it much lately, I've just been so weak. The move to the first base was one thing, but I can't move again, I won't. I'm going home, honey. I told Nora not to give this to anyone but you. I know she'll listen, she's such a good girl.

I know you don't think that video or any of those emails are true, and maybe you even know for a fact they're not, but we both know I've been going downhill, and all I really want is to hope, and that's exactly what I'll get waiting here for the Umbra to take me. I know they're usually black and scary, but I've heard that sometimes they're white, shiny, and beautiful. I hope those are the ones that come for me.

I love you, and if it's all true, everything they say, I'll get to love you for a long time - forever. I know it feels like I'm leaving you, but I'm not. This is the only way I have any hope of holding on to you and the kids. Give the other notes to the kids whenever you feel they're ready. Keep them happy, Cedric, don't let whatever time they have be wasted on worry and fear.

Love, forever and always,

Caren

He held the note in his hand for a long time, and after that long time was over he sat down and held it for longer. He read the words over and over again. He didn't want to believe them, but, at the same time, he wanted it all more than anything. He wanted to be wrong. He wanted Bryce and John and everyone else to be wrong. He wanted the Umbra to give his wife health and life and keep all the promises they made in that video. He didn't know what to want anymore.

She spoke as though they'd lost already – *'whatever time they have left'*. Part of him hoped she was right about all of it, but part of him hoped she was wrong. He didn't know which thought he hated himself for more.

His daze was broken when he felt Nora's arms fold gently around his neck, and Aaron's squeezed tighter than before.

"So when will Mommy get here?" Nora said.

Cedric was confused, and it must have shown on his face because Nora seemed equally confused.

"Mommy said the note was for you," she said. "She said it would tell you when she would be with us again."

The warmth Cedric had felt while reading the letter was eradicated by the chill of that message. *Together again?* It couldn't be. It had to just be something Caren had said so that Nora would evacuate as she was supposed to. Would she really want us to fail? Cedric didn't know. With Caren gone, he didn't know if he didn't want them to fail on some level.

He wandered for a little bit, holding Nora and Aaron's hands. They talked, but he didn't really hear what they said. Nothing seemed real. Caren was gone, given up. She was so strong. He felt like he would crumble, should crumble, without her. He felt bad that he was still standing. He should have been knocked to the ground, broken, in tears, but he felt nothing. *Shock*, he thought, hopefully.

He heard a voice calling his name, as if his head were underwater. He couldn't tell where it was coming from, then he felt the hand on his shoulder and he was spun around.

"Cedric, what's wrong with you?" John said. "We've been looking for you, the convoy is leaving."

Cedric could only look at him. He stared at John's face. He was confused at first, then there was worry. After a moment of staring, John's face changed to fear, but the last change was pity. It was as if he knew, as if he knew that Cedric was experiencing a loss, a pain, that he could not understand.

"Come on, Cedric," he said as he flashed encouraging smiles at the children. "And you munchkins too, let's get back to the trucks."

Aaron smiled and giggled, but Nora only nodded. She knew. She knew and it was all his fault. He was weak. All Caren had asked him to do was keep them happy, ignorant and happy, but he had failed. He hadn't even tried to fool her. *"So when will Mommy get here?"* She had wanted to believe. If he had tried to fool her, she would have let herself be fooled, but he was selfish. He needed everyone to know his pain. He hated himself.

"Cedric," John yelled from up ahead, "Come on."

Just walk.

He watched his feet as they moved, right, left, right, left. He found a rhythm, a beat. That seemed to help. Nora started to do the same. He had to stop. His sadness was infecting her.

"John, wait," Cedric called after him. John and Aaron came walking back through the bushes. When they got there, Cedric handed over Nora's hand and said, "Take her back with you, nature calls. I'll just be a minute."

Their eyes met, and Cedric knew John could see it all. He nodded.

"All right, kiddies," John said in the voice he always used with the kids. "I'll race you back to the cars, winner gets to –"

Aaron was off as soon as John mentioned racing, and Nora shortly after. John chased after them shouting, “cheaters,” they were all laughing. Cedric felt himself smile and wasn’t sure how he felt about it. He didn’t think he should be smiling right now, maybe never again.

No. Caren would never stand for it. He would play with his children. He would hug and kiss them enough for the both of them, he would defeat the Umbra, he would get Caren back. He found the last two thoughts drifting in his head. They bounced around. It was as if his inner voice was echoing, and it always asked the same question. *Can I do both?* He didn’t know.

When he got into the SUV, John handed him a small pill.

“Rest a while,” he said.

Cedric didn’t know what the pill was. He didn’t care. Sleep sounded like the best idea he’d heard in a while.

He popped the pill into his mouth and swallowed. He laid his head back on the seat was asleep in minutes. The last thing he felt was Nora’s little wet lips on his cheek.

When he woke up, he was at the next base, and Dr. Bryce was standing over him.

“Good morning,” he said with his casual condescension. “So nice of you to finally join us. A couple more hours and we would have had to wake you with amphetamines.”

Cedric felt dizzy, disoriented. He tried to stand but abandoned the endeavor quickly. It all hit him at once. He remembered. *Caren is gone.* He wanted to talk to the man from the machine. He wanted to know what his wife would face.

“Where is the machine man?” Cedric said.

Dr. Bryce’s expression was his version of confused. It meant he was lost, just like anyone else, but it managed to maintain his unique air of condescension.

“The man from China,” Cedric said. “The one that told us about being in the machine.”

“You mean Mr. Chun.” He was clearly waiting for the name to ring a bell, for Cedric to nod, something to indicate that was the person he meant.

“I think so,” Cedric said.

“He didn’t make it out,” Dr. Bryce said.

Cedric didn’t know what do. He rolled over so his back would face Dr. Bryce. After a few minutes, he took the hint and left.

Hours went by. A couple nurses came in to see if he needed anything. One brought him a banana.

Moments later, John walked in.

“Hello, Cedric,” he said.

John didn’t appear to be trying to cheer him up with fake smiles and an inflected voice, and that made him happier than any veiled attempt would have.

“How are Nora and Aaron?” Cedric said. “They weren’t any trouble were they?”

John smiled and pulled up a chair.

“No trouble,” he said. “Angels, as always.”

John looked like he wanted to talk about Caren, so Cedric quickly brought up a different subject.

“So how many bodies did the Black Seals bring back?” Cedric said. “I hope less than last time, we could barely keep them all.”

Cedric didn’t know why they brought bodies back anymore. It wasn’t like there was anything to be learned from them. The bodies all went to Bryce though. Cedric and John had

asked many times what he was doing with all of them and he always smiled and said something vague, arrogant, and agitating. All they could really know was that whatever he was doing with them, he thought it would win the war.

"They didn't bring any," John said. "In fact, from what I can gather, there is no sign of the Seals on the scanners or radios."

He said it as calmly as he could, but Cedric could still feel the unease, even panic, in his voice. If the Black Seals had lost, what hope did the rest of the military have?

"I'm sure there is an explanation," Cedric said. "Maybe their vehicles got fried and they had to walk."

John raised his eyebrows and nodded in that way that was supposed to say, 'possibly,' but his posture, his folded hands, and his thousand yard stare said something more like, 'let's hope so.'

Cedric was glad when Director Russell walked in.

"Hello, Dr. Mankins," he said. "I'm glad to see you're awake." Director Russell put his hand on John's shoulder. "I'm not sure what he gave you in the car, but whatever it is, I want some."

The three shared a chuckle followed by a short, awkward pause.

"I'm sorry to hear about your wife," Director Russell said. "I don't know how she wasn't accounted for. We are investigating and we will find whoever —"

"It was nobody's fault," Cedric said. "She gave herself to them."

Cedric was angry, furious, but he didn't know who at. Was it Dr. Bryce? Director Russell? John? Caren? Director Russell had a look on his face as if he'd known and was just trying to be delicate. *Did he know? Does everyone know?* He thought instantly of Nora and Aaron.

"I'm sorry," Cedric said.

John patted Cedric on the shoulder.

"I'll go get the munchkins," he said. "They'll be happy to come see you."

After an exchange of nods with Director Russell, John left Cedric and the Director to their uncomfortable silence. The Director looked strange. He seemed to be in possession of a discomfort that was born separate from Cedric's outburst.

"Is something the matter?" Cedric said.

"Your presence is required," he said. The words burst out of him as if it had been killing him not to say it. "Please follow me."

Cedric was confused, but he quickly changed his clothes and did as Director Russell asked.

Everyone they passed in the corridor stared at them. It was as if they knew something, or thought they knew something, that he was on his way to find out. The way Director Russell conducted him through the halls didn't help ease his anxieties. He never looked back, never slowed. He just walked and people in the hallway got out of his way.

Finally, they entered a small room. The only people inside were Dr. Bryce and Deputy Director Hastings. Dr. Bryce was staring at him.

"Please sit," Director Russell said. Everyone sat, but Dr. Bryce was the last to do so, as if he were trying to show some dissatisfaction.

Everyone was looking at Cedric.

"Some things have happened in the short time we've been here," Director Russell said. "While you were asleep, we arrived at this compound." Director Russell looked around at the

two other men. “We were not the first to arrive.” He seemed to struggle to wrap his mouth around the words he was trying to say. “Somehow, most of the crew from the destroyer, Valley Forge, whose last known position was off the northern tip of Japan approximately nine months ago, was here waiting for us.”

All eyes were on Cedric, but they didn’t seem to be awaiting a response. They seemed to be weighing him, judging his fortitude. There was something else left to say and they were deciding whether or not he could take it.

“What else?” Cedric said. “You could have told me all of this in my room.” All of a sudden, fury like he’d never felt rose up within him and it took all he had to choke it back and speak without screaming. “Is it about Caren?”

“We don’t know,” Director Russell said. “Everything was strange, impossible even.” Director Russell seemed to be seeing it all in his reflection on the table, whatever it was, trying to make sense of it all. “Chairman Lan Guang, was with them,” he said as if it were a question. “He has an Umbra, a live Umbra.”

Cedric recognized the name, then the man’s face. He thought of the video Caren had shown him that day. Cedric wanted to hit him, but didn’t. The words ‘live Umbra’ kept bouncing around in his head. Cedric’s intrigue and eagerness were almost instantly replaced by fear. Cedric bolted to his feet.

“We have to get it in a rubber space, lead walls. We have to –”

“Do you think we’re idiots?” Dr. Bryce said. He would have sounded bored if he wasn’t so angry. “It is confined and has no way of signaling reinforcements, though we’re fairly certain they’re coming since our Black Seals are about four hours overdue.”

Once again, a confused expression washed over Cedric’s face.

“Why am I here then?” he said. “I still don’t see why I had to be woken up, pulled out of my bed –”

“It asked for you by name. It will only talk to you,” Dr. Bryce said. “I can’t for the life of me figure out why.”

Cedric was stunned. Why would it ask for him? Why did it know his name? How did it know his name? He froze as the last question entered his mind. *Is this about Caren?*

No, it couldn’t be. Why would one of the Umbra ask for him just to deliver news of his wife? It was silly. It had to be something else.

“Not to rush you,” Director Russell said. “But we’ve got it just down the hall.” He hesitated. “It is willing to talk.” Director Russell seemed to nearly be begging. “And anything you could learn from it...”

He didn’t need to finish the sentence. Cedric knew how valuable an interview with a live Umbra had the potential to be.

“Take me to it,” Cedric said.

“This way,” Director Russell said.

He was walking quickly, much more quickly than when they’d come from Cedric’s room earlier. Everyone looked at Cedric even more intently now. They must have known what this walk meant too.

When they got to the room, John stood outside the door with a television monitor and a small, well-dressed Asian man whom Cedric could only assume was Chairman Lan.

John smiled, but that only made him appear more nervous.

“One small step for man,” John said, still apparently trying to lighten the dark mood.

Chairman Lan was saying something to him, but Cedric couldn't follow. He was speaking English, but Cedric felt as though he were listening from under water. His head was swimming.

Cedric tried his best to smile. He assumed that whatever Chairman Lan was saying was important, but Cedric couldn't help but think that he should see his children first. They had to be worried, scared, missing their mother and probably feeling as though their father had left them too.

"Ready?" Director Russell said, putting his hand on Cedric's shoulder. "We'll be in the next room, watching and listening through the one-way."

"Okay," Cedric said.

He put his children from his mind and followed John through the door. Nobody else entered, and John left as soon as the monitor was in place. He didn't even plug it in. It wasn't until the door shut behind John that Cedric even noticed the ghastly, black thing sitting perfectly erect on the cot, staring at him. It had on something that looked like a rubber straight jacket, but even confined, it was the scariest thing Cedric had ever seen.

He felt he were dreaming. After a while of motionless staring, it began to look more like the cadavers Cedric had seen a hundred times. He was less anxious. His breathing became more regular. He relaxed enough to realize he should sit. He was about to grab the plastic chair from the corner when it moved.

It was as if a statue or a sculpture had come to life. It didn't seem real or even possible. He'd never seen one move. His anxiety and fear came flooding back into him.

He didn't know what to do, so he just remained still beside the monitor. He felt like a deer in the road; as if at any moment it would spring from the bed and kill him where he stood.

"Hello," Cedric finally managed to say at a volume he was sure was inaudible.

It must not have heard him, but he couldn't bring himself to speak again. He tried, but it was as if his brain was using all of its power just to comprehend the existence of the being in front of him.

Cedric wanted to do something, find any reason to avert his gaze from the ghoul sitting on the bed. After a couple seconds, he moved to plug the monitor in, but as soon as he got close to the cord, the monitor started buzzing then went blue. Cedric froze again.

He stood behind the monitor, only able to stare at the thing on the cot. The monitor started making a beeping sound, a smoke alarm. It sounded angry. Cedric didn't know what it wanted. He wanted to put his hands over his ears, but he couldn't move. He was petrified.

The beeping stopped. The Umbra cocked its head to the side as if it were confused. In that posture, it seemed childlike, almost harmless.

Cedric flinched when it extended its foot, but then it started using the leg to motion for him to come forward. He did, very slowly. As soon as he got in front of the monitor, it held its foot up to signify a halt. Cedric obeyed. It motioned for him to turn around.

The last thing he wanted to do was put his back to it. As much as he wanted to look away, the idea of losing sight of it for a second scared him to no end. But it kept motioning. The monitor began that dreadful beeping again. It didn't take long for Cedric to turn, and when he did, he was surprised to see a calming, blue screen that said, "Hello."

Cedric turned to the Umbra, then back to the message on the screen.

"Hello," he said more audibly than the last time.

The monitor beeped in its shrill way again, and Cedric turned.

Dr. Cedric Mankins, 987-55-5478, the screen read. **Son of Charles and Margret Mankins. Married to Caren Mankins, formerly Caren Richards. Father of two children: Nora, daughter, age nine, and Aaron, son, age six.**

Cedric tried his best not to appear alarmed, but wasn't sure how well he was doing. The screen flashed green then back to blue. It had a new message on it.

Why don't you put the monitor by me, so you don't have to keep turning around every time I say something?

Cedric glanced at the mirror behind the Umbra. If he moved the monitor, they wouldn't be able to see its answers. He searched the room for a camera. There had to be a camera.

Once he found the camera in the corner over his right shoulder, Cedric did his best to gather himself before doing as it had asked. *Focus on the monitor*, he said to himself. *Pretend that the thing on the bed isn't even here.*

He positioned the monitor as far away from the Umbra as he could while still being pretty sure it was in view of the camera. He hoped this would allow him to look at the monitor and lose the creature in his peripheral vision.

Thank you, floated on the monitor for some time.

It was as if it was waiting for Cedric to initiate. It had to know that he had more to gain from this conversation than it did.

"You know my name," Cedric said explicitly to the monitor. "What should I call you?"

The Umbra shifted, making him focus on it for a second. He hated it. It was like watching a corpse move. He almost wanted to have a curtain brought in so he wouldn't have to see it, but there was no way showing that kind of fear would be good for interrogation.

We do not have 'names' as you call them. The text on the screen seemed to flash or blink in hesitation. **We call each other by what you would describe as frequencies. My frequency, as well as most of my brothers, is not within the range of human hearing.**

"So what should I call you?" Cedric said. "It will be hard to have a conversation if I don't know what to call you."

The Umbra smiled. It was a wide, gruesome smile that somehow managed to seem playful.

I think we'll know who you're talking to, the screen said. **Even if the room is a little crowded.** As the last words appeared on the screen, the Umbra turned and looked at the one way mirror behind it. **I don't know whether to be insulted or amused that they don't think I know there are five people behind that 'mirror.'**

Cedric didn't know what to make of that comment. Was it actually mad that people were watching? Had it expected total privacy?

"How —"

The monitor flashed red and beeped so loudly Cedric had to cover his ears. When the noise subsided, the screen turned blue again.

I can feel their charges through the wall, rolled across the screen like a ticker.

This made Cedric relax. This construction seemed playful.

Could you please remove this terribly uncomfortable jacket, flashed onto the screen as the Umbra began to squirm underneath its rubber vest. **Anything you fear I could do to you with this off, trust me, I can do just as easily with it on.**

Cedric didn't know if he could trust it. Maybe all of the small talk, smiles, and the playful tone were meant to lull him into a false sense of security.

“How do I know that jacket isn’t stopping you from knocking me out and escaping so you can go tell the rest of your people where we are?”

The Umbra seemed to let out an exasperated sigh followed by a silent laugh. It had no lungs, no diaphragm. These actions had to be meant as imitations. He wondered if the purpose was to mock or ingratiate.

It smiled and lightning shot from the top of its head against the rubber walls where it seemed to be absorbed and cease to exist. It happened so fast, Cedric didn’t jump in fear until a second after.

I assure you, my brothers already know exactly where you are. There would be no point in escaping.

The words sat on the screen, taunting him, begging, daring him to ask the question they invited him to ask.

“How?” Cedric said.

The Umbra smiled so big, so triumphantly that Cedric wanted to take it back. It was as if it wanted him to know, them to know. As if it was gloating for all the Umbra the world over.

Take this jacket off me, and I’ll tell you. The words flashed on the screen. **Take this jacket off me and you can know everything.**

It had to be a trap, a trick, a lie. It couldn’t tell them everything. It couldn’t, unless – Cedric’s mind froze. He didn’t want to think the answer, but it came against his will. *Unless there’s no way we can win.*

Cedric must have been visibly distracted because the monitor beeped.

Think it over, tickered across the screen. **That is my one and only offer. It will expire when my brothers get here. You have no more than a week.**

That made Cedric angry. It was a threat. As if the Umbra hadn’t threatened them enough. Cedric was tired of it. He marched over to the Umbra, undid the clasps, and yanked the jacket off. Then he got his face so close to its that he thought he could see the blue eyes hidden deep beneath their fleshy coverings.

“Watch your tone,” Cedric said.

Its face was stone, unresponsive. He turned and walked back to his previous spot, flinging rubber jacket into the corner.

I apologize, appeared on the screen. **I shouldn’t have threatened, but that jacket was uncomfortable.**

The Umbra was hunched on the cot, its posture conveyed a deep shame. It seemed to be honestly seeking his forgiveness. For a second, Cedric actually felt sorry for it.

“It’s all right,” he said. “I’m sorry they put that thing on you, but you can understand why.”

The Umbra nodded.

Yes, it is only natural that you’ve come to fear us. We never explored a diplomatic route because it was deemed futile, citing the inflexibility of the human societal mindset.

“Our civilizations have never interacted,” Cedric said, raising his voice. “How could you presume to know the first thing about us?”

The Umbra did not flinch in the face of Cedric’s anger. It stood against it with the expression of a parent weathering the storm of a toddler’s tirade.

We know everything about mankind, appeared on the screen. The text sat there, alone, for some time, as if it was inviting Cedric to interrupt, to ask another question, but he did

not. **Any information, any person, place, thing, or idea that has ever existed and continued to exist in an electronic record is available to us. You have no secrets from us, no passwords or encryptions can stop us. We come and go from your servers and hard drives as if we were never there.**

Cedric was stunned. This capability, even as a possibility, had not come up in any discussion. It changed everything. None of their operations had been secret. The Umbra had known their every move.

“How?” was all Cedric could manage to say.

He felt as if he would collapse. The implications were like a giant weight pounding against his head.

“How?” he said again, this time more forcefully.

The Umbra nodded. It was not smiling. It did not mock him with silent laughter. It sat like a librarian in front of a group of children who could not yet read for themselves.

We grow our own servers in our natural dwelling places, what you would call cities. The words lingered on the screen and the Umbra watched Cedric’s face carefully. **They are synthesized and engineered from the unfertilized eggs of our females. When complete, they act as conduits that allow our consciousnesses to navigate your internet, perusing and accessing all the information available anywhere on it without the hindrances of an IP address or any other identifying markers.**

Cedric’s eyes left the screen to stare at something else, anything else. He needed to think. He needed to decide what this meant so he could think of what to ask next. Maybe it was arrogant, maybe the Umbra as a whole were arrogant. There had to be a way to beat them.

“Where are these bio-servers?” Cedric said even though he already knew the answer.

They had to be the big electrical disturbances off the coast of China, Australia, the Mid Ocean Ridge between South America and Africa. There had been one forming in the Gulf of Mexico before they’d lost their feeds.

The message on the screen confirmed his suspicions. The more this Umbra told him, the worse his fears got that this conflict could not be won.

Cedric only had a few questions left to ask. All he really wanted to do was leave and be with his children so that they would have some final good memories to relive in the Umbra’s damn machines.

“Why did you start this war?” Cedric said, not caring how confused, afraid, or pitiful he looked. “We must have coexisted for a very long time. Why do you come for us now?”

As with the last question, it nodded to indicate it had heard, but this time it took longer for a message to appear on the screen. It appeared to be in deep contemplation, struggling for words, words that would not hurt, would not crush him more than had already been done.

We did not start this conflict, appeared on the screen. You started it the first time you dumped waste in the ocean. It paused, as if to gather itself. It appeared as though it would cry if it could, as if the information it was conveying was harder for it to say than it was for Cedric to read. **We breed on three year cycles.** The words shook on the screen just as the Umbra quivered in its seat. **Our last cycle was fertilized a little more than two years ago.** The Umbra slouched even lower in its seat. **We watched them grow, they were near hatching.** It moved its hands over its head in a frenzy, rubbing off the burnt, deformed, black scales and revealing the brilliant, white underneath. **But then a poison was dropped on their nursery. Radioactive waste from Chinese power plants. All of them died, my daughter included.**

The words on the screen were fuzzing, becoming nearly illegible. He wasn't afraid anymore; he wasn't nervous; he was just sorry. It was all he could be. This thing – this being in front of him – had lost a child; their whole civilization had lost its children. All at once, the tables turned, the equation flipped backwards. They were the source, the aggressor; man had intruded.

Cedric stood for a long while, confused feelings of blame, hate, anger, and sympathy wrestling for control of his mood.

"We didn't know you were there." As the words left his lips he wanted them back.

The screen flashed red and the monitor beeped in such a shrill pitch Cedric put his hands over his ears and nearly fell to his knees. The Umbra stood but did not move forward.

IT SHOULDN'T HAVE MATTERED, exploded onto the screen. **WHO ARE YOU TO POISON THE HOMES OF THE OTHER INHABITANTS OF THIS PLANET?** The Umbra pointed its webbed finger at him in awful accusation. **INTELLIGENCE, SENTIENCE, DOES NOT MAKE US BETTER THAN THE OTHER BEINGS OF THIS PLANET, IT MAKES US DIFFERENT. NO DIFFERENT THAN CLAWS, FANGS, OR WINGS.** The words on the screen shook as if they were trying to burst from it. **HUMANS ARE MISGUIDED, SELFISH ANIMALS, BUT WE PLAN TO TEACH YOU A LESSON IN MERCY** Lightning flared from the Umbra, striking the walls to no affect. Cedric fled to a corner and made himself small. He could hear the door rattling, he could see it shaking. They were trying to get in, trying to save him. **WHERE YOU KILLED, WE WILL GIVE UNENDING LIFE.** It took another step toward him. **WHERE YOU EXERTED A TYRANNY OVER YOUR FELLOW ORGANISMS, WE WILL SEEK FRIENDLY CONGRESS WITH OTHER INTELLIGENT AND UNINTELLIGENT BEINGS THROUGHOUT THE UNIVERSE.**

"I'm sorry," Cedric yelled. "I'm sorry."

He yelled it over and over again. He didn't know how many times he yelled it, but he stopped when he felt a gentle hand on the wrist of the hand that covered his eyes. It was the Umbra. All the anger had seemed to have left it.

It walked back over and sat on the cot. The door was still shaking. He could hear them calling his name from the other side.

"I'm fine," he yelled through the door.

The monitor beeped and Cedric looked up to read the message on the screen.

I'm sorry I got angry. What happened to my child and the children of my brothers was no personal fault of yours. The words hung on the screen, and the Umbra gave Cedric a truly friendly smile. **Do not worry, Dr. Mankins, you and your family will be preserved. You all will, and maybe, someday, if we can spread across space, colonize and seed other planets as we plan, we will find a planet on which mankind can live, where it will not threaten other life as it does now.**

It nodded, and Cedric nodded back. They had come to understand each other. Without warning, the door flew open, it must have let them in. Almost instantly, one of the soldiers hit the Umbra with an EMP and it fell limp.

Cedric's friends were pulling him, trying to get him out of the room, but he was fighting them. He wanted to see. He wanted to make sure no harm came to the Umbra because it had been right – right about everything.

Mr. Poole

Mr. Poole was halfway between taking off his rubber combat gear and putting on his suit when the cabin door opened behind him and one of the Rangers poked their head in.

"We'll be entering California air space in a few minutes, Sir," the man said.

"Thank you." Mr. Poole continued tying his tie, and the man left without Mr. Poole having so much as looked at him. It was the third time they had sent someone for him, and he hated being rushed.

Mr. Poole was too preoccupied to bother making eye contact, being polite, or even answering their subtle summons in a timely manner. His mind was filled with possibilities, reasons why he and his unit had been recalled, and it had been ever since the order had been received.

Again, the door burst open behind him. Mr. Poole spun to let the Ranger know, once and for all, that he would be out when he was out, but realized it was Captain Rosby and held his tongue.

"California is dark, sir," Captain Rosby said. "We've checked the instruments three times and I used my own GPS to confirm."

Mr. Poole's lips moved, but his tongue wouldn't cooperate. No words came. How could they have come ashore? *We have the suits, the plastics, the EMP.* Mr. Poole felt that his entire world was shaking, crumbling, 35,000 feet down.

"Take me to the cockpit," Mr. Poole said in a cool, even tone.

Captain Rosby nodded and parted the sea of Rangers who were pretending to stand disinterested in the aisles. Mr. Poole could feel a fear emanating from them that he hadn't felt the whole time they were in China. They were uncertain. They must have felt as if the invincibility they had experienced fighting the Umbra in China had been an illusion.

As he entered the cockpit, Mr. Poole could feel the same fear coming from the pilots.

"Do we have any radio contact?" Mr. Poole said.

The pilot's head whirled nervously. He appeared deeply fearful, but had managed to cover it with a nearly transparent sheet of bravery.

"No, sir," the pilot said. "All channels are just fuzz."

Mr. Poole had feared as much, but he didn't dare show it.

"The Umbra must have overtaken the shorelines," Mr. Poole said. "Just continue flying inland until you find a suitable, illuminated area to land."

The pilot's face became harder, more stable, as the frenzy left his eyes.

"Yes, Sir," the pilot said in a steadier voice. "We'll let you know over the loudspeaker when we're landing."

Mr. Poole smiled and nodded before glancing at Captain Rosby as if to say, *come with me*, then, exited the cockpit. He headed back to his room, and Captain Rosby was there within minutes.

"I want you to put your gear on," Mr. Poole said. "Don't order the men to or even tell them I told you to, just let them see you do it. They'll do as you do and it won't shake them like a combat order."

Captain Rosby nodded but remained in the chamber. He wanted something. Whatever it was, it seemed clear that Captain Rosby wasn't leaving until it was out.

"Speak freely," Mr. Poole said.

"Thank you, sir," Captain Rosby said as he loosened his stance. "This doesn't feel right." Captain Rosby struggled to word his explanation. "What I mean is, if they have the coast, they know we're here." He looked away, clearly upset at his inability to express his fears. "It feels like a trap."

Mr. Poole was relieved. It was good to know that Captain Rosby felt it too.

"I know," Mr. Poole said. "Get your gear on and a chute too." Mr. Poole went to his bag, took off his tie, and started changing back into his rubber combat attire. "Be ready to jump, we don't know if we're safe up here."

Mr. Poole had his back to the Captain, but he was sure he gave his curt nod and took his leave to do as he'd been asked.

After he'd changed and was about to leave his cabin, Mr. Poole decided to put his suit on over top of the gear. He didn't want to appear scared or secretive in front of the men. It was best if they only saw Rosby's caution.

By the time he got out of his cabin and into the corridor, all of the Rangers were suited up, parachutes and all. Seeing them in their gear made some of Mr. Poole's fear subside.

As he was looking at the Rangers standing ready, alert, not scared, Mr. Poole noticed Mr. Bucks still in his plaid shirt and khaki pants. His stare was distant.

"Mr. Bucks," Mr. Poole said. "I'm glad to see you dressed for our landing."

Mr. Bucks seemed startled as Mr. Poole's voice pulled him from whatever daydream he'd been having. Mr. Bucks quickly took stock of his attire.

"This is as good as I've got," he said, looking around at the Rangers in their combat gear. "But it doesn't look like we'll be landing anyway."

The disinterest with which Mr. Bucks made this observation startled Mr. Poole, and he was silent longer than he'd have liked to be.

"There is nothing to worry about, Mr. Bucks," Mr. Poole said. "I just thought it would be a nice impression to make for the men to get out of the jet in full battle gear. Maybe you should suit up as well."

"No thanks." Mr. Bucks seemed about to resume his staring contest with the unseen distance.

Fine. If he didn't want to be prepared for the worst, Mr. Poole wasn't going to force him. It wasn't worth his time. *But it's not like there is anything else to do but wait.* Mr. Poole sighed and slouched, exasperated with his conscience.

"Mr. Bucks, why don't you come with me," Mr. Poole said. "I may have a spare suit that will fit."

Mr. Bucks didn't seem to care, but he followed. He barely even walked behind Mr. Poole, it was more like he sulked. The sadness seeped out of him like body odor. Mr. Poole felt as if he were being covered in sadness, as if it was contaminating his mood, his mind, even sticking to the fibers of his suit.

"Mr. Bucks, are you all right?" Mr. Poole said once they were safely inside his cabin.

Mr. Bucks seemed shocked by the question.

"Mr. Poole," he struggled for words. "My wife and daughter are gone, and I will never see them again." He paused as if contemplating not continuing. "We may have only been a mile from them, when we were in the wall – maybe less than that." He trailed off as if it was too painful for him to finish the thought.

Mr. Poole wished he hadn't asked. Knowing the root of Mr. Bucks' despair didn't help. He didn't understand it, couldn't understand it. He had nothing of comparable value to lose. He

could imagine losing his most prized possession and still know that the approximation was nowhere close to the pain this man was feeling. He wanted to say something comforting, to tell Mr. Bucks that once America was won, the military would spread and defeat the Umbra everywhere, but he couldn't, California was dark, and only God knew where else.

"I've got a suit in here that may fit you," Mr. Poole said, trying to change the subject. "I think you should put your rubber suit on under it, just in case."

"No thanks," Mr. Bucks said in the same dead tone as before. "Thanks for offering though."

Mr. Bucks gave a weak smile as he turned to leave. Mr. Poole thought about stopping him, but he couldn't think of a reason so he just nodded to the back of Mr. Bucks' head as the door closed behind him.

No sooner had Mr. Bucks closed the door than Captain Rosby opened it.

"The pilot says there is a flat stretch of highway he can land on," he said. "It's just inside Nevada."

"Tell him to take us down," Mr. Poole said. "We'll assess the situation on the ground and go from there."

Captain Rosby left before Mr. Poole could reconsider his instructions. He wasn't sure landing was the best option. He wasn't sure if the Umbra could get them that high in the sky. And he wasn't sure what kind of information could be obtained on a deserted stretch of road just inside Nevada, but they had to do something. The fuel was supposed to get them to California so this may be their best chance at a safe landing.

Mr. Poole put his fingers to his temples as he'd wanted to do ever since he'd been told California was dark. The hopelessness he felt seemed heavy enough to bring the whole plane down. He hoped against reason that there was some explanation for the loss of the coasts – he hoped it was just the coasts – when he was sure the military would have had thousands of men outfitted exactly as his team was, if not better.

The door burst open behind him and Mr. Poole quickly regained his composure.

"What is it?" he said, turning to see Captain Rosby's stone-carved face inset with a deep, burning fear around the eyes.

"Come with me, sir," he said in a voice impossibly even and cool for the terror on his face. "Our radios."

He said radios as if it were an explanation, as if that would inform Mr. Poole what he was about to witness.

When he entered the main corridor, the face of every Ranger mirrored the terror of their Captain. The radios were all hissing, fuzzing. At first, it seemed garbled, as if it was just static, but then he heard it.

"*Surrender,*" the radios croaked in a voice seeming to contain every tone. "*Land, surrender, mercy, amnesty.*"

Mr. Poole stood speechless as the words repeated through the static of the radios; once, twice, three times – he stopped counting after a while. He could hear different dips and pitches in the message. *It was not a recording. They were speaking through the radios.*

Everyone stood in silence. Any trace of courage seemed to be draining from the Ranger's faces. Mr. Poole could feel it draining from his as well. For the first time in a long time, he felt exposed, as if he were betraying exactly what he was feeling – deep, unimaginable fear.

Mr. Poole searched the faces for some sign of resilience. When his gaze came to rest on Mr. Bucks, he felt his heart sink again in his chest. Mr. Bucks' face held an expression alien to him, but immediately apparent in its meaning.

He was afraid, but there was no anxiousness. It was as if the fear came as a relief, as if he'd been waiting for them to lose. Mr. Bucks' and Mr. Poole's eyes met, and in that second, Mr. Poole could see it all: the loss, the pain, the fear, the resignation, the emptiness.

"Surrender," the radios hissed again in unison. *"Land, surrender, mercy, amnes –"*

Captain Rosby grabbed the radio and pushed the button to speak, silencing the Umbral voices. All eyes were on him. His eyes were hard and deep, as if he hadn't yet decided what the next move was. Slowly, he moved the mouthpiece to his lips.

"No," he said as he raised the radio above his head and smashed it on the ground. "No," he shouted as the other Rangers began smashing their radios as well. "Open the doors, and take us down to 17,000 feet if you can," he yelled to the cockpit. "Rangers, form up and prepare to fly."

"Hoo-ah," the Rangers said in unison.

Mr Poole was in awe of Captain Rosby. With one action, he'd changed fear into fervor. Their faces had transformed into the expressions it seemed knights would wear under their helmets.

The copilot came running out of the cockpit.

"Captain, how long do we have to descend?" he said.

"Two minutes tops," he said. "The closer we get to the ground, the more danger we're in."

"Sir, we can only get to about 20,000 feet in that amount of –"

"That'll do," Captain Rosby said as he dismissed the man back to the cockpit. "Rangers, we'll be taking our leave at 20,000 feet," he said like an announcer pumping up the crowd at an event. "The air will be pretty thin and we don't have any tanks. What does that mean to you Rangers?"

"That the pilots are scared to go from 25,000, Captain," said one of the Rangers from the back of the crowd.

"Sir, yes, sir, Hoo-ah," said a chorus of Rangers, some with their fists in the air.

Captain Rosby smiled. A real smile – big, white, happy. Mr. Poole was almost certain he actually saw him laugh.

The staticy message of the Umbra was still repeating very faintly over the loud speaker, but it became less and less audible as the "Hoo-ah" choruses got louder.

Captain Rosby walked over to Mr. Bucks who was still sitting in the corner, seemingly oblivious to what was going on around him, and yanked him to his feet.

"Put this on and strap yourself to me," Captain Rosby said in a tone that was beyond refusal, but then his eyes and voice softened and he hunched to meet Mr. Bucks' eyes. "Is this what they'd want?"

Mr. Bucks seemed to have heard that. His face changed, as if the question had solved something. Mr. Bucks hurried into the harness suit and strapped himself to the Captain.

"Line it up," he shouted. "Johnson, get Poole strapped in."

Hearing his name jarred Mr. Poole. He'd just been standing there. When the big Ranger named Johnson came over, Mr. Poole quickly strapped himself on.

“Ready,” he said in the most confident tone he could, but it sounded like the proclamation of a boy compared to the commanding bass of Captain Rosby ringing in his head as well as off the walls of the plane.

“Set it to auto and get in line,” Captain Rosby shouted toward the cockpit.

The two pilots came running out and hurried into their parachutes.

“Go get ‘em, Rangers,” Captain Rosby shouted.

After a chorus of “Hoo-ah,” the line started moving. Mr. Poole peeked around the shoulders of the man in front of him. He saw the silhouette of a Ranger with his hands on each side of the doorway – then he was gone. Suddenly, Mr. Poole was aware of the frigid winds blowing in through the door.

Every step he and Johnson took closer to the door, the cold seemed to increase ten-fold. Before he knew it, Mr. Poole was in the front of the line and Johnson’s hands held the door on either side ready to propel them out into the open air.

“When we land, bend your knees and roll,” Johnson said. Mr. Poole nodded, and Johnson counted down, “Three, two, one.”

In one motion, they were out in the freezing air, plummeting into the darkness below that, if he hadn’t known better, Mr. Poole would have assumed was the Pacific Ocean waiting to swallow them up and deliver them straight into the hands of the Umbra.

Chairman Lan

Chairman Lan walked toward the child’s room. Just like the sub, armed guards stood by the door at all times. The only difference was that these men were clad in rubber and armed with plastic; these men could actually keep the child inside against its will.

He waved to the men and they moved aside. The guards had gotten used to Chairman Lan’s visits to the ‘Umbra’ as they called it. Chairman Lan refused to use such a name. *Shadows* – that was something the children definitely were not. As much as everyone else would have liked to deny it, they were here and they were real.

It sat motionless but erect when he entered. Chairman Lan had asked it if it was sleeping once, when he’d seen it like that; it had told him that his kind does not ‘sleep’ as humans would consider it. He described it more as a retreat or a withdrawal inward – totally conscious but resting the body.

Sometimes Chairman Lan wished he could do it too – withdraw, live within himself. He felt as though that world was finally more at peace than the one outside, and he didn’t know if that made him happy or sad.

“Hello,” Chairman Lan said.

The child began to twitch and move. Even after all of his visits and interactions with this being, its movements still made him nervous – as if someone were breathing cold breath on the back of his neck.

Hello, appeared on the monitor that had been permanently mounted on the wall. **How are you today, Chairman? Is it raining yet?**

Small talk with the child was still strange for him. It was far more perceptive than any person. It could feel the weather and, sometimes, even sense his mood by the charges being exchanged within his brain.

“No, not yet,” he said. “I brought you something.”

The child smiled, already knowing what it was. The smiles of the children had grown on him. He no longer feared them. Now, as with the smiles of loved ones, the child's smiles made Chairman Lan smile as well.

Chairman Lan pulled the flash drive from his pocket and handed it over.

"It's a picture of my wife," he said. "I had the tech people encrypt it."

The smile on its face got bigger and it sat forward more expectantly.

There is more? No? Flashed in all colors on the screen.

"You guessed it," Chairman Lan said in the same voice he'd once used when he got his son surprises. He had always gotten them in pairs. "There is also a file hidden on the picture. It is a picture of my own mother and it is also encrypted."

The child smiled and nearly bounced on the bed where it sat. He had never seen it this happy before. For a moment, Chairman Lan was impressed with himself and the surprise. He knew it loved breaking encryptions as much as Chairman Lan enjoyed Mahjong, but then he saw a flicker of sadness spread across its face as it regarded the drive.

"What's wrong?" Chairman Lan said. "Is the encryption too simple? I told –"

No. The screen buzzed a little, but not in a rude way. **The encryption is complex. I will enjoy this gift very much. Thank you, my friend.**

Chairman Lan was scared, but he didn't know if it was for the child, himself, or both.

"You're welcome," Chairman Lan said. "Please, tell me what is the matter, maybe I can help."

The child smiled.

You are a good man, but my sadness cannot be yours. The letters on the screen seemed as sad and dejected as the figure on the bed. **I fear my kind may yet lose this struggle.**

Chairman Lan was shocked. The idea of victory hadn't crossed his mind since he'd told Admiral Tubbs that California was lost. That flicker of hope had been snuffed out when he got to shore and saw the complete domination – the extent of the darkness. *They could lose?*

"How?"

The child seemed confused.

Why are you not happy? I tell you mankind may prevail, that you may defeat us, and you feel nothing?

Chairman Lan could say nothing. He was equally surprised by his own reaction. Had he given up? Was he afraid to hope?

"I do not feel nothing," he said. "I feel sadness and, in this sadness, confusion." The child nodded, but nothing appeared on the screen. It wanted more. "I am sad because our victory means your death, but your victory does not mean ours."

Does it not?

Chairman Lan was surprised and further troubled by the words on the screen. Did this child consider life in the machines to be death? Chairman Lan wasn't even sure if he really believed it was otherwise.

"No, it does not." Chairman Lan surprised himself with the certainty in his voice. "Some may not think that being in the machines is really living, but it's definitely not being dead."

The child nodded in a way that neither agreed nor disagreed.

I thought that once. It raised its head to look at him with its eyeless face. **I thought that when we made the plans, resolved to make your existence safe for the world,**

but I've used this lengthy separation from my brothers to think on it alone, and I can't say I feel the same anymore.

Chairman Lan did not know what to say. There was a silence, not an awkward silence, but it was not a comfortable one either.

She is very beautiful, appeared on the screen. Chairman Lan was confused, but then the child smiled. **Your mother. She is pretty and her smile is big and warm.**

The thought of his mother made Chairman Lan smile and relax.

"Yes she was," he said. "She died six years ago, and my father went the following year. She had been the only thing keeping him alive."

The child nodded.

If we'd have come earlier, maybe we could have saved him.

"No," Chairman Lan said. "He wouldn't want to live —"

He froze, the child nodded, and Chairman Lan could think only of his father in the machines. What torture that would have been for him. Living over and over again the death of his wife — knowing, in those twenty dark seconds between machine cycles, that his wife was dead, he was alive, and that he would never really see her again. *Worse than death.*

I'm going to save this picture. It pointed to its head. **The smile makes me feel better, do you mind?**

Regret was written all over the child's face. It had made its point but hurt him in the process. Like a good friend, it was sorry.

"Keep it," Chairman Lan said. "I've got the real one right here." Chairman Lan patted the breast pocket of his jacket that contained his wallet.

Thank you.

It seemed as if the child was ready for him to leave, as if that thank you implied a goodbye, but Chairman Lan was not ready to go.

"I hear you've been getting more visitors," Chairman Lan said. "How are you liking Dr. Bryce?"

I assume no more than you do. The child smirked and Chairman Lan smiled. **He's an exceedingly arrogant man. The fact that he's nearly as smart as he thinks is nauseating.**

Chairman Lan laughed.

"So what do you talk about?"

We don't talk much. The smirk seemed to evaporate from the child's face as anger boiled underneath. **I'm helping him with some research.**

Chairman Lan felt as if a cloud were forming between him and the child — a fog. Was the child helping Dr. Bryce? Did it think that he and his kind deserved to die? He felt as if he did not know this being anymore

"I'm sure whatever it is, you both will be successful."

Yes, we are close to a breakthrough. The child slumped and stared at Chairman Lan's shoes. The child's behavior was confusing. Chairman Lan knew he had to be missing something. **Can we talk about something else?**

"Of course," Chairman Lan said, also thankful to change the subject. "Anything you like."

What do you believe happens when beings like you and I die?

The Chairman was stunned by the question. The child had spoken rarely of death before, and never of the afterlife. Chairman Lan wasn't sure if the children believed in the afterlife, or if they really died at all.

"Are you asking my religion?"

No, flashed on the screen. **I just want to know what you believe.**

Chairman Lan wasn't sure how to respond. He'd never been a religious, or even a spiritual, man.

Do you believe there is another life after this?

"Yes," Chairman Lan said. "I believe we continue to exist in one way or another."

The child nodded, again, without agreeing or disagreeing.

"We have never discussed this before," Chairman Lan said. "Do your kind even die?"

The child smiled as if it was surprised, as if it would laugh if it could.

We can be killed. Its face darkened and its brow furrowed in a way that made it seem almost human. **But we do not die as you do. Our lives do not expire on their own; they must be taken.**

"Then I hope you live forever."

I do not. The words hung on the screen, red letters, ominous against a black backdrop. **I have lived a long while. Long enough to see what happens to others of my species who have lived even longer. They lose respect for life. They take it for granted, and it becomes easier for them to take it from others.**

"You would not –"

I have. The screen buzzed and flashed. **And if they called me I would likely do it again.** It looked up at Chairman Lan, almost pleading. **Immortality takes the beauty out of life. I hadn't watched a sunset for maybe a hundred years until I was on the ship with you headed here.**

Chairman Lan didn't know what to say. Could he disagree on this topic? Could any mortal comprehend the weight of immortality?

"I cannot possibly understand your struggles," Chairman Lan said. "But, for me, I know I will enjoy our conversations forever inside the machines, and always look forward to when I may see you again."

The child nodded, accepting the 'agree to disagree' summation of their discussion.

And, for me, I look forward to the day when you will see me never again. Goodbye, my very good friend. My time with you has changed me for the better. I am at peace.

"I am glad," Chairman Lan smiled. "And I feel equally blessed by my time with you. Goodbye. I'll see you tomorrow, my very good friend."

The child nodded, neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and withdrew back inside itself as Chairman Lan closed the door.

Mr. Poole

Eventually, he was able to make out the reddish tint of the desert sand that seemed to be speeding toward them. It was like watching a ball come at him in slow motion. Any second, he was sure the ground would just slam into them.

He could see roads first. After a bit, he started staring straight down, at the spot it seemed inevitable he and Johnson would land and liquefy. The chute of the man below them opened, and

that made him feel better. Soon, Johnson would pull the cord and they would float instead of plummet.

Something in the distance gleamed in the moonlight. He couldn't tell if it was a car, a roof, it was too far away. Then there was a sharp pull where his harness met his legs, waist, and chest, and he found himself floating peacefully to Earth.

He looked back where he'd seen the gleam. He saw many of them, hundreds, thousands, as far as he could see. Slender, metallic poles like the ones they'd seen in China. It was like the Umbra's flag, and they planted it a million times wherever they went. Lighting jumped around at random between them. He wondered if one of those bolts would strike him and Johnson as they landed.

The white chute below them seemed to deflate and fold in on itself as its passenger landed on the ground. Mr. Poole was anxious to land until he and Johnson started getting close. The ground was approaching much faster than Mr. Poole had anticipated. He was sure there had to be a hole in the chute.

Mr. Poole closed his eyes, but then remembered he was supposed to land a specific way. *Bend your knees and roll.* He opened his eyes. The ground seemed to be a conveyor belt beneath them. He felt Johnson push his knee into the back of his leg. Mr. Poole nodded. All of a sudden, the ground rushed up to meet them. Mr. Poole bent his knees, rolled, and experienced pain like nothing he could remember. His shoulder popped out of its socket. Then there was a second jolt of pain which he hoped was it popping back in.

"Up," Johnson said. "Out of the harness and stay out of the way of the others. We need to get to high ground, higher than these poles, the bolts won't shoot up at us."

Without speaking, Mr. Poole did as he was told. His head was ringing. He assumed it was caused by a combination of his ears repressurizing constantly during the 20,000 foot drop, and the abrupt dislocation of his shoulder.

The others were coming in fast. The bottoms of the chutes were black, so as not to be seen from below, but the lights on their pull cords flashed slightly so team members who knew what to look for could get out of their way. He and Johnson walked to find the four men who had landed before them. They had gone to the highest point in the area and put the beacons from their pull cords in a pile on the ground so the others could locate them.

Within the next ten minutes, everyone from the plane had found their way to the small gathering – everyone except Captain Rosby and Mr. Bucks. Panic was about to set in when one of the pilots pointed and everyone turned to see a massive figure accompanied by a short, chubby one approaching.

"Is everyone here?" Captain Rosby said.

Everyone nodded, but Captain Rosby took roll anyway.

"Make a perimeter," he said. "We'll camp here for the night. Everyone pair up, we'll be keeping half hour watches. Mr. Bucks and I will have the first and the last."

Mr. Poole sat on a rock while the copilot, who said he was also a medic, took a look at his shoulder.

He was poking and prodding at the area around the socket. Mr. Poole winced repeatedly.

"Well it definitely popped out," the copilot said. "Can you raise it for me?"

Mr. Poole raised his arm above his head and moved it around in circles as the copilot asked.

"I think it went back in."

Mr. Poole was relieved.

“Just don’t strain it, I’ll see if we have something cold to put on it.”

Mr. Poole smiled and thanked the man as he left to look for ice. The sounds of work going on all around him suddenly filled his ears. Tents were going up, rations were being distributed, and a perimeter was being established. Captain Rosby was in charge now and Mr. Poole was fine with that.

As he sat alone, he looked around at the bustle and felt as though they were back in China. This thought shook him deeply. *Can it really have come here? Are we no better prepared than they were?* Mr. Poole was shaken, broken, useless. When his eyes came to rest on Mr. Bucks, their eyes met and Mr. Poole felt as though they were mirrors. He imagined they were two broken men falling into the depths of each other’s failures.

“Captain, take a look,” one of the Rangers pointed to the dark horizon.

“What is it?” Captain Rosby grabbed the man’s binoculars.

He looked for a second, wiped the lenses, and looked again.

“Suit up,” he said. “Weapons ready.”

All the Rangers, still in their suits from the jump, scrambled to get their gear from the tents.

“What is it?” Mr. Poole said.

Captain Rosby handed over the binoculars and pointed Mr. Poole’s head in the right direction.

At first, Mr. Poole thought the lenses were out of focus, but then he realized he was seeing it right. There was three or four of them – shiny, metal spheres coming their way. They were moving fast, too fast, like a plane. They were moving faster than anything terrestrial had a right to move. Whatever they were, they would be there in a minute, two at the most.

“Everyone grab a chute,” Captain Rosby said. “Hide yourselves, but don’t obscure your vision, we don’t want to fight unless we have to.”

Johnson grabbed Mr. Poole, tucked him against a rock under the chute, and cut out four wide eye-holes facing the rest of the group. Everyone else was doing the same. Captain Rosby made sure everyone else was concealed before tucking Mr. Bucks and himself under the last chute.

Mr. Poole kept waiting to hear the rumble he was sure would accompany whatever was approaching, but it never came. They sat for a minute, maybe two. There was no sound besides Johnson’s shockingly calm breathing beside him. Johnson’s eyes were intensely focused through the eye holes, as if everything of importance was out there.

Like a silent movie, something metallic flashed through the center of camp. It kicked up dust, rustled the chutes, but made no noise. The silence was more frightening than any sound Mr. Poole had imagined them making. A couple seconds later, another flew through in the same quiet fashion, then another. It seemed as though they appeared and vanished, but the speed made Mr. Poole feel surrounded, as if they could be everywhere at once.

Johnson’s breathing was faster now, but his eyes were the same. Mr. Poole couldn’t guess at what that meant he was feeling. He was not a coward, but the courage of the Rangers was beyond him. Almost nothing shook them, and absolutely nothing shook Captain Rosby.

Another metallic blur cut silently through the camp. Mr. Poole hoped there were no more. Every second he got more anxious, thinking another would zip by. A minute went by with no blur; two minutes, three. Mr. Poole wondered how long they would wait before coming out. Mr. Poole wondered if he would come out at all. He felt as if those blurs were waiting around, circling, ready to pounce in the blink of an eye.

Johnson started to get up, out from under the parachute.

“What are you doing?” Mr. Poole said, clutching the Ranger’s arm.

Johnson smiled.

“Rosby gave the signal,” he said. “Look.”

Johnson pointed through the eye-hole, and Mr. Poole saw the flashes coming from the small slits in Rosby’s chute. It was some kind of Morse Code, but it had been a long time since Mr. Poole’s Boy Scout days so he wasn’t sure what it said.

With extreme caution, Mr. Poole exited the cover of the parachute. Nobody was speaking, but everyone had the same expression – a mix of confusion and fear. But Rosby’s face also betrayed a hint of disappointment. Had he wanted to fight, or did he just wish he could have gotten a better look at them?

When everyone started talking to each other, nobody talked about what had just happened. They talked about the jump, their gear, or even the weather. Captain Rosby didn’t talk at all. He just sat by his tent beside the silent Mr. Bucks.

“Captain Rosby, may I have a word?” Mr. Poole said trying to remove the slight tremble from his voice. “In private if you don’t mind.”

“No need for privacy,” Captain Rosby said. “We can talk here.”

Mr. Poole was surprised by the refusal of his request, however polite it may have been. Did Rosby know he was in control as much as Mr. Poole did? Did everyone know?

Mr. Bucks’ eyes were half glazed over and half staring into the abyss. Mr. Poole decided he could consider any conversation held in his presence about as private as it was going to get.

“All right,” Mr. Poole said. “I was wondering if you had any inkling as to what those metal blurs may have been.”

“Vehicles,” Captain Rosby said without looking up. “Really fast ones with treads like I’ve never seen.”

Captain Rosby pointed nonchalantly to the center of camp where the things had blown through. Mr. Poole nodded and headed over to inspect them.

The treads were, indeed, strange, but not in any way Mr. Poole had imagined. There seemed to be no tread at all, as if whatever had been propelling those things so quickly hadn’t had any surface texture to speak of. *How would it grip? How could it push forward?* Mr. Poole was no engineer, but this didn’t add up for him.

The most confusing thing was that there was only one track. It was as if they had followed perfectly behind one another, with no deviation. He couldn’t make heads or tails of the track so he found a rock and leaned against it. It made his shoulder feel better.

In a few minutes, the copilot returned.

“I found some pain killers.” He handed the pills to Mr. Poole. “Take one every six hours for the next few days until the tenderness goes away.

Mr. Poole nodded and the man was gone. *One pill every six hours? These had to be strong.* Mr. Poole didn’t know if he wanted to take something that powerful. The pill could make him tired, slow, maybe even put him to sleep. After about twenty minutes of resistance, the pain won out, and twenty minutes after that, he was asleep.

Mr. Poole awoke to a hand over his mouth.

“Don’t talk,” Captain Rosby whispered. “The pilots are fifteen minutes late for the watch change.”

Fear, once again made itself comfortable in the pits of Mr. Poole’s eyes. He tried to calm himself, but he didn’t believe any of the excuses floating around in his head. *The pilots aren’t as*

regimented as the Rangers, maybe they're just late. Maybe they wandered off. Maybe they found help and they're bringing it to us. Lies. None of it could be true.

Captain Rosby removed his hand from Mr. Poole's mouth. Something inside Mr. Poole still wanted to scream, shout, call out for help.

One of the Rangers handed the Captain his binoculars; Captain Rosby switched on the night vision and scanned the horizon. The sky had that hint of light in it as if suggesting the sun would rise soon. It had to be around four in the morning.

"Northwest," Rosby said, his head no longer scanning, but focused in one direction, like a hunting dog. "They're coming slower this time, I can see them clearly."

"Should we get in the chutes again?" One of the Rangers said.

"No," Rosby said. "They're moving slow, marching, not patrolling." He handed the binoculars back to the man who'd given them to him. "They know we're here."

The words echoed inside Mr. Poole's head. He couldn't make sense of them at first, he didn't want to.

"Rifles, batons, and EMPs ready," Captain Rosby said as he handed his equipment to Mr. Poole.

"What? You'll use these better –"

"No doubt I would," Rosby said as that real smile crept across his face again. "But I don't need them, that Dr. Bryce guy whipped up something special for me. I figure now is the time to try them out."

The Department man inside Mr. Poole was insulted. Why was he not told? Captain Rosby must have seen it on his face.

"It's nothing fancy or big," he said, pulling what looked like MMA gloves from his shoulder bag. "I only asked for some thick rubber gloves, you know, so I could grab them, but Dr. Bryce put these nodes on the knuckles and palms that trigger EMP on pressure." He laughed and clapped Mr. Poole on the back. "I got some Umbra boxing gloves."

Mr. Poole didn't know how, but he was smiling too. Something about Captain Rosby's merriment was more inspiring than any speech he could give or radio he could smash on the ground. Still, it didn't feel as triumphant – no, it felt resigned.

Mr. Poole's eyes met the Captains, and he finally saw it. He wasn't suiting up for victory, for a fight; all he wanted was his blaze of glory. He wanted to make his mark on the ones who would be telling the stories from now on. He wanted them to remember the big captain who beat them with his bare hands, even if it was only for a little while. Mr. Poole grabbed the baton and squeezed it hard in his hand; he wanted them to remember him too.

Mr. Poole took a place in the combat formation with the other Rangers for the first time. He'd wanted to in China, but he'd always told himself, 'next time,' there was no next time anymore, so today he would fight with Rosby and the Rangers. He would show the Umbra what a man was. The four metal spheres approached slowly.

Once they were about thirty yards away, Captain Rosby yelled, "Stop."

They did, and for a couple minutes, they just sat there. The Rangers just sat there, and there was silence. Each seemed to be waiting on the other.

"Where are our men?" Captain Rosby said.

A simultaneous cacophony of hydraulic releases and bending metal echoed from the spheres, and, in a process Mr. Poole witnessed but could not explain, they had changed from spheres to standing, humanoid, metallic suits that didn't have a trace of assembly or imperfection. It was as if the Umbra were wearing metallic bodies – organic, not mechanized.

At the center of each was a clear globe, in which an Umbra stood. As it moved, so did its metallic husk. One of them reached for its back. As it did so, the Rangers reached for their weapons, but it held up its hand as if to say, *I mean no harm*.

It slowly lifted the copilot into view. He was unconscious. The unit lowered him to the ground and let him fall in a heap. The Rangers moved to recover him, but the strange thing held out its hand, this time to signal halt.

The things smooth, metal arms fell to its sides, another hydraulic release was heard, and the clear enclosure that contained the Umbra opened and lowered it to the ground. It grabbed the skin on the back of the copilot's neck and he rose, but not like a humans rose. It was more as if he were inflated from the legs up and his body clumsily erected itself to a standing position almost against its will. Mr. Poole wondered what had become of the pilot.

"Hello," echoed from the mouth of the copilot, but he had not said it. It was as if the man was now no more than a megaphone projecting an unearthly bellow that he had only ever imagined hearing from God or the Devil. "We offer you the chance to surrender." The sound filled the limitless expanse of desert around them. It was as if the voice was coming from all sides simultaneously.

"This man surrenders, he wants to be with his wife and daughter back in China. He has pictures," Captain Rosby said as he walked Mr. Bucks to the front of the formation. "The rest of us want to play with your new toys."

A chorus of Rangers shouted, "Hoo-ah," as Mr. Bucks made his way toward the Umbra and its copilot puppet.

Mr. Poole was shocked. *Bucks is just giving up?*

"He will be delivered to them as he wishes," boomed the voice that was not the copilot's. "As for the rest of you, if you choose this combative course you will not be spared. All of you will die as this man's companion did." The Umbra pointed to the copilot who seemed, now, to be more an extension of the Umbra than a separate, human entity.

Mr. Bucks crossed the gap and stood beside the Umbra. He stood upright, not smiling, but now frowning either. His eyes didn't seem as dark in their depths, though they were still searching the unseen distance, they were different somehow. Now, it seemed as if he was hoping after something rather than dreading it. The body behind the speaking Umbra scooped up Mr. Bucks. He did not flinch. It put him in its back compartment, turned back into a ball, and sped away. Mr. Bucks was gone. He was no coward, just a man with a different end in mind.

An end, Mr. Poole thought as he squeezed the rubber grip on his baton. Part of him hoped this wasn't the end, that they would win, but it was only a small part and the rest of him was okay with it.

"This is your last chance for amnesty," the voice erupted from the copilot and shook Mr. Poole from his thoughts. "No harm will come to you if --"

"You've said this already," Captain Rosby said. His voice echoing in tandem with the unearthly rumble of the Umbra seemed triumphant, as if interrupting it was victory, victory over fear. "It sounds like you're stalling. Are you afraid?"

The Umbra smiled and so did the copilot, but it was a twisted smile, as if every muscle fiber in his face fought it.

"There is no victory to be had here," the voice came with less force, as if Captain Rosby had wounded it. "Even if you destroy our bodies, our minds live on in --"

“And we have nothing to lose,” Captain Rosby said, again silencing the echoing voice. “Because even if you destroy our bodies, our names live on, in your minds. You will never forget us.”

The Umbra seemed stunned. Its face was confused and its mouth quivered as if it had been defeated.

“Very well,” said the Umbra, in a voice seeming almost mortal.

It released the copilot and he fell to the ground in a heap once more. The globe was raised back into place within the metallic body, and the arm picked up the copilot’s body and placed him on the ground behind it.

Captain Rosby just started charging, no order, no shout. He ran, and Mr. Poole and the Rangers followed. The Umbra just stood there in their suits as if they were a shoreline and the wave of Rangers would just break across them.

Some of the rangers had their EMP rifles out so Mr. Poole got his ready. Johnson fired and the lights on one of the suits went out. It stiffened and began to fall, but a bolt from one of the poles hit it and it sprung back to life in time to maintain its balance.

When Captain Rosby was less than ten feet away, the body in the front moved toward him, but he clapped his hands together and the lights on all the suits went out. The lightning seemed as though it rushed from the poles to the suits. It wasn’t fast enough. Some of them were on the ground for a second or two before a bolt found them and they were up again. Captain Rosby jumped on the front of one of the suits and began bashing at the globe that contained the Umbra. The lights on the suit would flash on then off, as every strike from Captain Rosby released another local EMP.

Mr. Poole ran to him and tossed Rosby the baton. The Umbra inside was terrified. It held itself back against the rear of the globe, as if when Rosby broke through it wanted every inch it could get before he got to it.

Suddenly, Mr. Poole heard the screams all around him. The other Rangers were being beaten, torn, crushed.

“Captain,” Mr. Poole said, grabbing Rosby’s shoulder and turning him toward the scene.

At first, the Captain’s eyes were full of blood lust, he seemed to only see the Umbra beneath him, the one he could kill, but the intoxication quickly faded.

“Rangers,” he shouted. “On me.”

He took one last swing of the baton and shattered the globe. He reached in and was about to grab the Umbra, but stopped short. Instead, he put his finger right in its face and held it there until he was sure it was watching him.

“Remember,” was all he said before jumping down and running to organize his men.

As they ran, the shattered suit behind them changed back into a ball and sped off. The group of Rangers that met them in the middle was much smaller than the one that had charged in. at least four were dead or wounded, Mr. Poole didn’t see Johnson anywhere.

“Stay in formation,” Rosby said. “We take ‘em down and use our bodies to block the bolts so they don’t get back up, stay on top of em and between them and the closest pole.”

“Hoo-ah,” said all the Rangers in unison. “Hoo-ah,” they said again, this time, Mr. Poole joined them. It felt good to say it. “Hoo-ah,” he shouted again, this time alone.

They charged the two remaining bodies, each one with its hand wrapped around one of the poles. When they got close, Captain Rosby clapped his hands again. The lights on the suits may have flashed off, but if they did, it was too fast to see.

It didn't matter to Captain Rosby. He leapt onto it anyway and climbed up onto the clear globe and started bashing it as he had the last one, but it grabbed him and flung him by the leg as if he were a doll.

The other Rangers swarmed it; beating on the globe, pulling at its legs, but none of it seemed to phase the Umbra. It would grab them, fling them, kick them. When Mr. Poole approached, he could have sworn the Umbra in the glove looked straight at him and smiled. It pulled the pole out of the ground and swung it like a bat.

Mr. Poole had never felt so much pain. He heard his ribs break and he could feel blood filling his mouth, then he landed on the ground. He wasn't sure how far he'd been hit, but he knew he wouldn't be getting back up.

He looked back at the Umbra that had hit him. It was on the ground now. Captain Rosby was beating at the glass. Mr. Poole's vision was starting to blur, but he heard the globe break and he saw the blurry shadow of the Umbra hoisted out. It squirmed for a moment, then it went limp.

Mr. Poole shook his head and blinked his eyes. He tried to move his arms, to get back up, but nothing responded. He saw the shape of what he assumed was the last metallic Umbra suit fall to the ground. He heard the triumphant shouts of the Rangers, "Hoo-ah, hoo-ah." He tried to join them, but all he could do was mouth the words.

He saw two shapes running toward him.

"Poole." It was Rosby's voice, "Poole, can you move?"

Mr. Poole tried to shake his head, to say something, but he couldn't. He was glad he couldn't make any noises when Rosby rolled him over. It hurt so badly, he nearly passed out.

"Get the kit," Rosby said to the other blurry figure standing over him.

"Sir, I, there's —"

"Get the damn kit!"

The blur ran off to do as Rosby had said.

"You did good, Poole," Captain Rosby said. "We showed 'em."

Mr. Poole couldn't see his face, but he could hear that Rosby was smiling.

"They'll remember," he said. "We'll be the monsters they tell their kids about, the things hiding under their beds."

Mr. Poole smiled. Something wet was running down the side of his head. His ears were bleeding. His vision was getting blurrier too.

"More, captain," one of the Rangers shouted. "Lots more, all sides."

He could feel the Captain's hands tense, but he knew he was not afraid.

"You rest," he said in his smooth, fearless voice. "I'll be back for you after we take these next ones down."

Mr. Poole nodded and smiled. He wanted to be smiling when they found him. He wanted them to know that he didn't regret it, any of it. He wanted them to know that no matter what happened, the Umbra could not beat these men. They would live on, forever.

Cedric

The conference room was not nearly full, but everyone was there: Director Russell, Deputy Director Hastings, Chairman Lan, John, and Cedric. They sat in relative silence waiting for Dr. Bryce who had called the meeting.

Cedric was supremely disinterested in whatever this mystery meeting was about. For the past three days since his meeting with the Umbra, he hadn't really thought about anything except his children, and he wasn't happy he'd been called away and had to put them to bed early, knowing they weren't tired and would just lie in their beds scared and wondering where he was.

He stopped a moment and thought about Caren. He'd thought a lot lately about whether or not he would want to defeat the Umbra if it were even possible. He wasn't sure anymore. Beating the Umbra meant killing his wife who, as far as Cedric knew, was alive and well in a machine.

"Hello," Dr. Bryce said as he burst into the room. "I have tremendous news."

Dr. Bryce stood, smiling, as if waiting for someone to ask or else he wouldn't tell them.

"Well, tell us," Deputy Director Hastings said. "We've been waiting a good, long time."

"I'll do you one better," Dr. Bryce said as he knocked on the door. "I'll show you."

Two security men rolled in a cart and left. The cart was covered with a sheet and it was clear that there was something underneath.

"Gentlemen, prepare to be amazed," Dr. Bryce said as he yanked off the sheet. "I present to you, a very dead little Umbra."

Everyone was silent, frozen. Had Bryce finally lost it? Had the Umbra driven him mad?

"What the hell's the matter with you?" John said. "We've seen hundreds, maybe even a couple thousand of these." John stepped forward so his face was inches from Dr. Bryce, who was still smiling. "You've wasted everyone's time."

Everyone stood to leave.

"I assure you I haven't," Dr. Bryce said. "Would you like to know how this particular Umbra died?"

Director Russell was clearly confused, John was angry, and Chairman Lan seemed to be at a loss about exactly what was happening.

"How?" Cedric said. "How did it die?"

"I'm glad you asked, Dr. Mankins," Dr. Bryce said as he began to pace around the small room. "A gold star for you."

Cedric sat back down; everyone else did the same – John seemed more agitated about it than the others.

"This Umbra died of a virus, I –"

"I'm done," John said as he stood and grabbed his coat. "Umbra don't get viruses. They lack the body systems and structures to allow viruses to live and thrive. We all know this, goodbye."

"You will sit down, Dr. Megman," Dr. Bryce said, blocking the door. "I've won us this war today and I'll explain it to you however I like."

The two seemed about to fight, a contest Cedric was sure John would win, but it seemed like an awful idea.

"John, please," Cedric said. "Just sit, you're only making it take longer."

John and Cedric stared at each other for a couple brief seconds before John retook his chair.

"Fine, but be quick about it, Bryce, those of us with only one voice in our head have work to do."

Deputy Director Hastings laughed and Dr. Bryce shot him a stony glare.

“The Umbra died of a virus, one I, completely by myself, engineered. It took me numerous tries with different sequences of code and organic constructs, but it is done and it works.”

“How did you create a virus?” Cedric said. “You’re an engineer, not a biologist.”

“And the Umbra are more like computers than life-forms, no?”

Cedric nodded, Dr. Bryce flashed his arrogant smile.

“This virus acts more like a computer virus than a traditional one in that it is transmitted via electrical impulses sequenced as commands.” He looked at the group, possibly trying to see if any of them were catching on yet. Cedric was still confused. “I’m calling it the E-CUR, short for Electrical Current, Virus. It gains access to the Umbra by way of existing in an electrical unit that they try to communicate with or manipulate. When the connection is made, it infects the user.”

Dr. Bryce finished as if that was the end of his explanation, as if that was supposed to answer all of their questions, but the look on his face said he was waiting again – waiting for someone to ask the right question.

“What does it do once inside the Umbra?” Cedric said. At first he had just wanted the meeting to get over, but now he was actually intrigued.

“Another gold star for Dr. Mankins,” Dr. Bryce said. “Once inside, it attacks the areas of the brain that the Umbra uses to sense and determine the pressure of its surroundings. As we all know, they use this to adjust the thickness and density of the material that fills their body cavities.” Dr. Bryce grabbed a scalpel and moved to cut open the chest of the Umbra on the cart. “It confuses this mechanism into believing that the surrounding pressure is massive. This causes the material throughout the body to become so thick, so dense, that it can no longer transmit electrical signals, thus, their body is locked in this state and their brain is unable to reverse the effect.” Dr. Bryce made his incision through the sternum and down the chest to open the chest cavity. All of the men ducked to avoid the explosion of the material from the chest cavity, all except Cedric, he had put the pieces of Dr. Bryce’s presentation together. There would be no explosion. “According to my one live test, this all happens in less than seven seconds, and my research predicts that prolonged periods in this state will starve the brain of electricity and cause the subject to eventually die.”

All of the men stood to look into the Umbra’s exposed body cavity. The material looked nothing like it had before. It was black, blacker than black, blacker even than the burnt, deformed skin that covered the exterior of the Umbra’s body. It was as if the body had been filled with tar. Cedric touched it. The surface was like metamorphic rock.

“How scary is your friend now, Dr. Mankins?” Dr. Bryce said.

Cedric quickly withdrew his hand. Chairman Lan did the same. The men looked at each other. Fear, anger, and pity were painted on the Chairman’s face. Cedric was sure they were on his own. This was the Umbra with whom he had talked? The one that told him of its dead children? Cedric was going to be sick. He wasn’t sure if any of the Umbra deserved to die anymore, but this one he knew was innocent.

“Reverse it,” Cedric said as he flew at Dr. Bryce. “It didn’t deserve this.” Cedric felt as if he were no longer in control of his body – as if he were just watching a movie of a different man, a crazy man, throwing chairs around a conference room. “It’s inhumane. It’s like you’re strangling it for days before it finally dies. It’s cruel.”

Cedric felt arms, friendly arms, pin his to his sides.

“Settle down, Cedric,” John said. “It was the only live subject we had. He had no choice.”

There was something in John’s voice that understood Cedric’s anger, but for the most part he seemed confused by Cedric’s outburst.

“I think you should remember what side you’re on,” Dr. Bryce said. “This thing seeks to enslave you, use you like a Duracell battery until the end of time.”

Everyone was staring at Cedric. He wanted to leave and be with his children, but all of the men sat back down at the table and stared. He had to stay.

“Have them bring in some champagne,” Director Russell said through the intercom. “And assemble the men in the cafeteria, we’ve got some great –”

“Wait,” Cedric said. “We may not.”

“Dr. Mankins, please stop embarrassing yourself,” Dr. Bryce said, putting his feet onto the table. “I’ve won us this war and –”

“Have you?” Cedric said. “Because all I see is a magic bullet without a gun to fire it.”

Everyone looked at him. Director Russell’s face was the first to frown. He released the call button.

“He’s right,” Director Russell said, slouching back into his chair. “How are we going to infect all of them?”

Dr. Bryce’s smile slowly melted away. Cedric didn’t know how could he not have seen it? The virus wasn’t some chemical weapon to lob into the enemy ranks; it was a trap the Umbra had to step into. They had to access the device carrying it.

“I’ll figure something out,” Dr. Bryce said, still trying to sound completely confident. “I just need some time to think.”

He walked silently from the room, sending the guards back in to bring the cart behind him.

“That’s a good idea,” Director Russell said. “Maybe we should all take a break, brainstorm, and come back in an hour or two to see what we’ve got.”

Cedric looked at Chairman Lan as he left. He wanted to follow him, to talk about the Umbra on the cart, but John pulled him in the other direction.

“Talk to me,” John said. “What was that about in there?”

Cedric looked around the hallway, at the men standing around, at the clocks, anywhere but at John.

“It just seemed cruel,” Cedric said. “Its brain is still alive in there. It can’t see, hear, or move, but it exists in a world totally within its mind.”

“You mean like the people the Umbra put in the machines?”

Cedric hadn’t thought of it that way.

“It’s still different,” Cedric shrugged John’s hand off his shoulder. “In the machines, people relive their lives, the good times, the bad times, all of it. They only know what’s happening to them in the few seconds between sequences.” Cedric looked John directly in the eyes. “What Bryce did to that being is cruel. He locked it in its own head with only its thoughts, free of recourse or action. What would you do if all you could do was ponder silently for God knows how long before you died?”

“I’d think of my life,” John said. “The good times, the bad, all of it.”

John smiled and walked away toward the lab. Cedric just stood. Was he right? Was Bryce’s virus no different than the Umbra’s machines? Maybe Dr. Bryce had been right. Cedric needed to decide whose side he was on.

Cedric was no surer walking into the conference room two hours later than he had been when John had left him in the hallway. Everyone was sitting around the table. The only person who looked as uncomfortable as Cedric was sure he did was Chairman Lan.

“Good to see you, Cedric,” John said, smiling. “Come, have a seat. We have some pretty good ideas and would love your input.”

Cedric took his seat beside John.

“To catch you up, Dr. Mankins,” Dr. Bryce said as if he were a teacher talking to a student who hadn’t been listening. “We have decided that the best place to infect with the E-CUR is the Umbra conduit construction in the Gulf. According to our former prisoner, they all use those, correct?”

The reference to the ‘former’ prisoner nearly set Cedric raging again; he could see a similar flare in Chairman Lan’s eyes, but, like the Chairman, he restrained himself.

“Yes,” Cedric said. “When they communicate across long distances or access our internet, they use them.”

“Then it’s settled,” Dr. Bryce said. “We will infect the Gulf conduit.”

“How?” John said. “We’re trapped here, in the middle of South Dakota, and it’s safe to assume the Umbra are closing in on all sides.”

“When the Black Seals find their way –”

“The Black Seals are gone, Hastings,” John said. “They are four days late. The Umbra are coming, they know we’re here somewhere, and even if the Black Seals were here, apparently they can’t even stop the little bastards anymore.”

The room was silent. All of the men were thinking, fighting in their own way, to save mankind, and Cedric just sat there. He thought of his wife, immortal, happy in her machine. There had to be others like her – terminally ill, elderly – that the machines kept alive. Were they really alive? He glanced at John. When he looked in his friend’s eyes, he nearly wanted to die. Deep down, right in the center where the light used to show, defeat, bitterness, and resentment had smothered it. It was as if the fire that had once been there had finally consumed the core and fizzled out.

Cedric imagined John’s eyes like that, lying in the machine until the end of time. *The machines.*

“I think I know a way,” Cedric stood and said. “We will use their machines.”

Confused faces met his rediscovered smile. He saw a flicker in John’s eyes, confidence in him. He had to go on, had to fan the flames.

“To win, we must surrender.” Dr. Bryce rose to object, fury already in his eyes, but Director Russell put a hand on his shoulder and lowered him back into his seat. “At this moment, we can’t win. We have no numbers, no surprise, and no technological advantage, except the one we cannot use.”

Dr. Bryce shrugged off the Director’s hand and went to rise again, but Director Russell nearly leapt on him, putting both hands on Dr. Bryce’s shoulders and thrusting him back into the seat.

“Tell us, Dr. Mankins,” Director Russell said. “We’re all listening.”

“We know how their machines work,” Cedric said. “The nodes, the stasis, the energy harvesting. The part we’ll be utilizing is the stasis.” He saw a light go on in Dr. Bryce’s head, and John leaned his elbows on the table as if Cedric were telling a campfire story. “When the

Umbra come, we will surrender, they will be merciful and grant us what we wish. Our wish must be that we are laid to rest here, on this spot of our last stand.” Cedric paced around, piecing his thoughts together as he spoke. “We’ll use the machines to wait until they relax, until they aren’t ready for us anymore, then we’ll wake up, sneak down to the Gulf, and infect that conduit before they know what’s happening.”

“How?” Deputy Director Hastings said. “Wouldn’t we need someone to be awake to get the others out of the machines? And how long do you suggest we wait?”

Cedric was about to answer, but Dr. Bryce cut him off.

“Timers, Mr. Hastings. Timers and tazers,” he said. “I could make some tazer pads to insert under the skin of our tongues. I could program them to go off and overload the machine, forcing it to reboot.” He turned to Cedric. “How long would we need to wait?”

“Not long,” Cedric said. “They considered us beaten from the first time they set foot on land. I’d give it a couple of their breeding cycles – thirty years should suffice, but make it forty to be safe.”

“There’s too many variables, Dr. Mankins,” Hastings said. “There’s a billion ‘what if’s’ that could make this plan fail.”

“Where would we hide the E-CUR?” Dr. Bryce said as if Deputy Director Hastings hadn’t spoken at all.

Cedric drew a blank. They couldn’t hide it on the premises; the Umbra would turn it inside out making one of their machine hives to store everyone in.

“Hide it in me,” John said. “They won’t look in our bodies.”

The light was in John’s eyes. It was good to see the fight return. A shot was all he needed, and Cedric could give him that – slim as it may be.

“Best to hide it in the tissue and not in an orifice,” Dr. Bryce said. “We could put it in your calf.”

“Agreed,” John said, smiling.

Cedric could feel the smile around his eyes as well, but he wasn’t sure which part of him was smiling. Was it the scientist who craved the challenge the Umbra presented, or the father and husband who wanted to protect his loved ones? He thought of Caren. If his plan succeeded, he would be killing her. Would she hate him when she opened her eyes to him standing over her saying they’d won? Would he be sentencing her to death?

“What will we tell everyone here?” John said, snapping Cedric back into the conversation. “We can’t tell them the plan.”

“Tell them to surrender,” Dr. Bryce said.

“And if they won’t?” John was searching Dr. Bryce’s eyes for something Cedric knew he would not find – pity.

“We will remember them,” Cedric said. “If they resist, fight a fight they cannot win, give their lives, we will remember them.” Cedric thought of the fate of both the men and his wife. “It’s all we can do.”

Everyone was silent – not in shock, but reflection. It was as if the gravity of the decisions being made then, in that small room, hit all of them at once. *Who are we to decide the fate of mankind?* Cedric thought on this for a moment. *We’re all they’ve got*, was his conclusion.

“Dr. Bryce, get started on those tongue sub dermals,” Cedric said. “John and I will get the E-CUR hidden.” Cedric turned to Russell and Hastings. “You both need to convince the men to surrender, as many as you can.” Everyone sat, nodding, frozen, as if spellbound and awaiting further orders. “We need to hurry,” Cedric said as he opened the door and gestured for everyone

to leave. On his way out, Dr. Bryce handed him the E-CUR. He placed it gingerly in Cedric's breast pocket, as if even his breath could shatter the vial to pieces.

When Chairman Lan walked by, Cedric pulled him aside.

"Come with me, please," Cedric said. "I believe we should talk."

The small man seemed surprised but nodded and followed Cedric and John to the autopsy room. It was the only sterile room on site in which to perform the secretive surgery on John's calf.

They didn't talk during the walk, but when they got to the lab, John quickly excused himself to prepare the room. Cedric smiled as his friend walked away through the door. If they did fail, he knew that his fondest memories besides his wife and children would be of John.

"Chairman Lan, I believe we've come to have a respect for the Umbra that the others lack," Cedric said. "I want to know how you feel about this plan." The Chairman seemed nervous, as if he were on trial. "If I'm right, then I believe you are torn, hesitant, like me."

This seemed to calm the Chairman. He nodded, brushed some lint from his tunic, and straightened it.

"I have respect for the children," Chairman Lan said. His face became very sad. "The one you spoke to, the one that Dr. Bryce killed with his cruel virus, I considered him a friend."

Cedric was shocked. *I considered him a friend.* He'd never heard them called anything so human as 'him' or 'friend.'

"Do you believe we deserve this?" Cedric said. He needed to know what this man thought, this man who had also seen a side of the Umbra he could not totally explain or accept.

A part of Cedric still believed they did. He thought of the Umbra lying lifeless on the table, a parent killed for avenging his children. Cedric thought of his own children.

"I do not believe we do," Chairman Lan's said. "But they do not deserve to be wiped out either."

The Chairman's reply answered nothing. He was talking sideways.

"One of us must go," Cedric said. "Are you with us or them?"

"I am neutral," Chairman Lan said. "Part of me will be sad if you fail, but another part will be sad if you succeed." Cedric moved to speak, but Chairman Lan cut him off. "A friend once told me, 'It would be a sad waste for something alive, as you and I are, to cease to be so.' I will not interfere with your plan, but I will have no part of it either."

Chairman Lan bowed slightly, turned, and left. Cedric did not stop him. If not for his own small children, he may well have felt the same way.

"All ready in here," John said, peeking his head out of the lab door. Cedric washed his hands and walked in. "So how was your chat with our friend the Chairman?"

"He won't be a problem," Cedric said.

Their eyes met, and Cedric knew John could see the certainty. He nodded and got on the table.

"I put all the cadavers in the freezer," John said. "Didn't want them staring at us."

Cedric smiled, grabbed a syringe, and filled it with a shot of local anesthetic.

"Ready?" Cedric said.

"Yes, but you're not," John said. "Put that E-CUR in something sturdy."

Cedric sat the syringe down. He couldn't believe he'd forgotten to ready the E-CUR. He took it out of his breast pocket and really looked at it for the first time. For something so

powerful and complex, it looked very simple – just a pale, yellow, viscous liquid in the bottom of a vial. But when Cedric looked closely, it looked alive inside, not in the sense that he could see motion, but it seemed to churn of its own volition.

“Cedric,” John said, lying impatiently on the table. “Are you going to stare at it or find a container?”

Cedric sat the vial down gently on the table and started going through the surgical supplies. There wasn’t really anything designed for this purpose. In the end, he selected a catheter, melted an end, cooled it, put the E-CUR inside, and melted the other end. He flipped it over a couple of times to make sure it was sealed.

“The best I could do,” Cedric said, showing his improvised storage unit to John.

He laughed.

“It’s a good thing Bryce is the engineer and you’re the biologist,” John said. “But it will work. Catheter plastic won’t biodegrade inside the body.”

John laughed and rolled onto his side, ready for the procedure.

“Every now and then I have a good idea,” Cedric said.

John hobbled his way back to the conference room with Cedric’s assistance. He refused to use crutches.

“I’ll walk it numb,” he’d said. “I can’t let them see my limp, they’ll get suspicious.”

John’s fire had always made Cedric smile.

When they entered the conference room, the only ones there were Director Russell and Deputy Director Hastings. Cedric had expected Chairman Lan’s absence, and Dr. Bryce was probably still constructing the tazer pads.

“How did it go with the men?” Cedric said.

Director Russell shook his head.

“Lots of them left,” he said. “The ones still here said they will surrender.”

He slouched, something Cedric had never seen him do. It was as if the weight on his shoulders had finally broken them.

“We’ll need some of the Black Seal’s suits,” Cedric said. “If there are any around. It will make us look combat ready, and they’ll be helpful when we wake up.”

Director Russell nodded and gestured to Deputy Director Hastings to go get them. Hastings didn’t seem too happy about it, but he went. Cedric locked the door.

“Director Russell, I’ve been thinking,” Cedric said. “And I’ve talked to Dr. Bryce.” Cedric lied. “We think it would be best if just Dr. Bryce, John, and myself had the tazer pads.”

The Director’s head shot up, startled, shocked.

“Why?”

“The reason is simple,” Cedric said. “We need someone to talk to them when they get here, and we can’t do that with stitches in our tongues.”

Director Russell nodded, but it was in submission, not agreement. Cedric could tell he wanted badly to be a part of the mission, to take one last shot at the Umbra.

“I understand,” he said. “I can’t say that either Hastings or myself would be as useful as any one of you three.”

“Thank you,” Cedric said.

Director Russell nodded and sat as Hastings returned with five plastic suits.

“Dr. Mankins, find one that fits Dr. Megman here,” Director Russell said. “Then take the rest to Dr. Bryce and you two find ones that fit the best, Hastings and myself will take what remains.”

Hastings was confused but silent. Cedric found one that seemed right for John and left Director Russell to fill Hastings in on the rest.

When he got to Dr. Bryce’s lab, he was bent over a desk with some very small tools Cedric didn’t know the name of. Seeing him made Cedric picture the dead Umbra on the table. He shuddered.

“Dr. Bryce,” Cedric said. “Do you have a minute?”

Dr. Bryce turned to face him, clearly annoyed.

“Not really,” he said. “But I have the feeling one is forfeit all the same.”

Cedric looked around the room for the cart; it wasn’t there.

“What happened to it?” Cedric said.

“The Umbra?” Dr. Bryce said. “I had some guards take it out, destroy it, burn it. We can’t have the others finding out the trick we have up our sleeve.”

It was the right move, a smart move, but something in Cedric’s gut twisted just the same. He felt sorry for it.

“How many do you have done?” Cedric said, pointing to the work table. He didn’t want to seem too affected by the news.

“One,” he said. “Two if you count my original prototype.”

Cedric looked down at the suits in his arms. He’d forgotten about them for a moment.

“Find one of these that fits,” Cedric said. “You have more time than you think, we only need three.”

“For you, John, and me,” Dr. Bryce said, not even slightly surprised. “I’m glad you got that cleared up because I wasn’t quite sure how to tell them they shouldn’t come.”

Cedric was surprised. For all his personality issues and character flaws, Dr. Jordan Bryce was hands down the most intelligent man he’d ever met.

“Yes, he didn’t take it well,” Cedric said. “I think he wanted one last shot at them.”

Dr. Bryce laughed.

“No, he didn’t,” he said. “Russell has given up and Hastings is a moron. Having either of them come with us would just slow us down.”

Cedric was shocked. He barely moved, barely opened his mouth to disagree, and Dr. Bryce cut him off.

“Russell isn’t bitter, he doesn’t want another shot,” he said. “He feels it’s his duty to come. I bet it was sadness you saw when you told him, but not because of not coming. He was sad because it made him realize how much he didn’t want to go to begin with.”

Cedric couldn’t disagree, not with any certainty. Could he be right? It couldn’t be. Bryce was just a cynic.

“Find one that fits,” Cedric said as he set the suits on the table next to Dr. Bryce.

“Thank you,” he said, turning back to the work on his table. “I’ll meet you all in the autopsy room when I’m done. I don’t expect it will be more than two more hours.”

Cedric nodded, took the suits back to the conference room, picked one out, and left to see his children, stopping by the lab on the way.

They were asleep when he got back to the small quarters they shared.

“Nora, Aaron,” he said, kneeling in between their beds. “Wake up sleepyheads.

Nora rolled over and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Aaron was still fast asleep. Cedric smiled. Aaron had always been a sound sleeper, like his mother. He bent down and gave Aaron a soft kiss on the cheek.

“Wake up, buddy,” Cedric said. “Daddy has something to tell you.”

After a couple shakes, Aaron stirred. Nora was already curled around his neck, trying to fall asleep in his arms.

“I was having a good dream, Daddy,” Nora said. “We all went to the store and Mommy bought us peaches.” She paused. “Mommy said peaches will be in season soon. Can we get some?”

Cedric didn’t know if he could smile without crying, but he tried.

“That’s a terrific dream, sweetie,” Cedric said. “And of course we can.” It took all he had to keep the tears from his eyes. “I’ll bring you peaches tomorrow.”

Nora nodded, her head buried in Cedric’s chest. Peaches were her favorite.

“I want some too, Daddy,” Aaron said, totally awakened by the prospect of food.

Cedric sat down on the bed and put each of them on one of his knees.

“You guys know me and your Mommy love you more than anything, right?” Cedric gave them each a kiss on the cheek.

“Yes, Daddy,” Nora said.

“I love you too, Daddy,” Aaron said, trying to wiggle free and get back to bed, as if he’d fulfilled his requirement.

Cedric smiled, scooped him up, and blew a raspberry on his stomach. Aaron laughed.

“Gross,” Nora said in a tone that said she wanted one too.

Cedric kissed her neck until she giggled.

“I want you each to take one of these,” Cedric said, opening his hand to reveal two small, blue pills. “It will help you sleep.”

“Why do we need help sleeping, Daddy?” Nora said.

“Because, sweetie.” Cedric pulled them both tight to his chest so they could not see his face. “You’ll need your rest for when we go picking peaches tomorrow.”

“Yay,” Nora said, nearly bouncing free of Cedric’s hold.

Nora grabbed the pill and took it. Cedric laid her back in her bed and kissed her forehead. When he turned, Aaron sat cross-legged on the bed, holding out his hand. Cedric smiled and gave him his pill.

“I love you, Daddy,” Aaron said as Cedric tucked him back into bed.

Cedric kissed him on the cheek.

“I love you too.”

Cedric washed his face and left, looking at his children, bumps under the sheets in the darkness, one last time. The sedatives would let them sleep through it all. He had promised Caren he would protect them, not let them be afraid, and that’s what he was doing. His children would never have to see the Umbra’s ghastly, burnt faces. Their dreams would not be haunted. Their last memory would be with their father.

When Cedric made it back to the conference room, it was nearly dawn. Deputy Director Hastings seemed upset and Cedric had a feeling he’d missed quite an argument.

“Dr. Bryce said for you and Dr. Megman to meet him in the autopsy room when you returned,” Director Russell said. “Hastings and myself will gather the men and wait for you in the yard.”

Cedric walked over to Hastings’ and Russell’s side of the table and stood in what he hoped was a proper salute stance.

“We aren’t military, but we’ll take it,” Director Russell said as he saluted in return.

Hastings did the same and the men all shook hands.

“It’s been a pleasure,” Cedric said.

“Likewise,” Director Russell said as Cedric hoisted John to his feet and moved for the door.

Cedric felt as if he were walking down Death Row; each soldier seemed to look at him as if they were marked men and blamed him for it. John must have noticed it too because he was silent.

John’s lips loosened as they entered the restricted autopsy area.

“So how are the kids?” he said.

“Asleep,” Cedric said.

John nodded and the silence continued as if unbroken.

When they entered the actual autopsy area, Dr. Bryce was waiting for them like a butler awaits an expected guest – heels together, hands behind his back, and a smile on his face, though his smile was all teeth and condescension, the usual.

“Glad you could make it,” Dr. Bryce said, checking his watch. “I was beginning to think the Umbra had come already and I’d be cutting my own tongue open.”

“Not yet,” John said. “But they’ll likely not be long so let’s hop-to.”

Cedric nodded and helped John up onto the table.

All was silent as Cedric stared at the tazer pads on the sterilized tray. The weight, the import, of what they were doing hit him all at once. The fate of the world hinged on them, on their brains, their bravery, on the slightly curved, wafer-thin frames of some improvised tazer implants.

“So, who’s going first?” Dr. Bryce said, staring back and forth between Cedric and John as if he wasn’t even an option.

“I will,” John said without a smirk on his face or a laugh beneath his words. “I’m already on the table.”

Cedric nodded and patted his friend on the shoulder.

“Dr. Bryce, please prepare the local anesthetic,” Cedric said. “I’ll wash my hands.”

Dr. Bryce did as he was asked, though not without first giving a seemingly knee-jerk expression of disgust in being treated like a nurse.

Cedric was ready, about to inject the pain killer into John’s tongue, but he grabbed Cedric’s wrist.

“Wait, how do these work?” he said. “Won’t they fry our tongues when they go off?”

Cedric hadn’t thought of that. They both stared at Dr. Bryce.

“Is that a serious question?” Dr. Bryce said, seeming actually amused. “Do you think I would endanger my own tongue?” He walked over and picked up one of the pads, turning it over. “The back is outfitted with a non-conductive polymer that wraps around the edges.” He put the pad down and went back to his seat in the corner. “Plus the tongue clamp acts as an attractor, pulling charges from the body, it’s like a lightning rod. The charge will do minimal damage, if any, to your precious tongue.”

“Good enough for me,” John said. “Worst case scenario, he’s wrong and we save the world slobbering like dogs.”

Cedric tried to smile, but the moment seemed too heavy. There was too much at stake, all Cedric could think of were his children.

“Say, ahh,” Cedric said.

John did, Cedric injected him with the anesthetic, secured the implant, and stitched it back up. The anesthetic was probably unnecessary, the implant was paper-thin and just went under the first layer of skin, but it was easier and they wouldn’t need to speak anyway.

He inserted Dr. Bryce’s sub dermal next, then John did Cedric’s. They put on their rubber suits and made their way to the main yard to join everyone else. The Umbra would definitely be there within the next two hours, three at the most. They didn’t talk during the walk. Their tongues were numb, so they couldn’t, but Cedric didn’t think they would have even if it had been possible. He could see the sag in their postures and feel it in his own. The weight was inescapable. It was an indescribable pressure mixed with a deeply unsettling sense of foreboding. It was as if they were on their way to watch the world end.

The yard was like a field of wax figures. Nobody moved, nobody spoke, everyone’s solemnity sat heavily on everyone else – the combined forces building upon each other until it felt as if it would crush them all in an instant.

They stood like that for an hour, maybe a little more. Then everyone started to move, not walk or talk. The yard was a sea of swiveling heads. Cedric looked around too. He couldn’t explain it, but everything felt different, it was as if the air itself was more alive. It seemed to pull at him. *They were close.*

The loudspeakers crackled.

“Surrender,” said a garbled cacophony of tones and pitches. “You are surrounded. Surrender or die.”

Director Russell raised a megaphone to his lips.

“We surrender,” he said. His voice rang off the trees. “We are unarmed.” Director Russell looked at Cedric, their eyes met for just a moment. “We have one request.”

“Ask,” echoed from the loudspeakers, hissing and humming into the distance.

“We wish to be laid to rest here,” Director Russell said, nearly blurting it out.

There was a silence – a long silence. It seemed to be closing in. Cedric felt that if he didn’t whisper, speak, or even scream, he would never be able to utter another noise.

“Your request will be granted.” grated from the loudspeakers, shattering the silence.

Cedric felt a moment of relief, but it was quickly followed by shock and fear.

The Umbra walked out from the trees. They were all black. There were so many – hundreds, thousands. It was as if all the shadows of the forest were coming forth to claim humanity, to conquer the daylight.

Then, machines started coming in. There were rollers, squids, and some others that didn’t fit any descriptions he’d ever heard. There was a big machine on tank treads. It carried a load of tall, gleaming poles. It resembled a turtle, and the poles seemed to stick to it rather than be carried on it – they had to be pulled off by the large, metal robot-like suits that some of the Umbra were in. These machines started taking them out and staking them deep in the ground.

They were claiming the land. They were claiming it right in front of them. There were cords and wires that the Umbra set to connecting to the station’s power sources. Some of the poles started receiving bolts, as if they were coming to a point, as if all the land around them had been claimed and the power was all coming here, being funneled to this location.

“Form a line,” boomed from the loudspeaker.

Director Russell raised the loudspeaker to give commands to the men, but one of the machines with tentacles snatched it from his hand. He froze and stared. It was as if in that one action, it had taken his power, his authority – the last things he had left. He looked at Cedric, John, and Dr. Bryce as if he were begging, pleading, that they find a way to make it work – that they find a way to take it all back.

More vehicles came in, but these were the first to give Cedric chills. They were giant things with no wheels, just long, spindly legs like a spider. They walked, carrying their loads above the trees. It seemed as if they were actually being careful not to step on anything. He could see what they carried. On the back, in stacks of three – the machines, the sleep machines. Cedric was going to spend the next thirty years in one of those. He thought of his children.

He panicked. He had forgotten them, in the barracks. He started walking against the grain. He felt like a salmon swimming upstream. One of the Umbra grabbed him, but he shook it off. He felt more eyes on him. He turned back to the Umbra he’d shrugged off.

“Kids,” Cedric said, focusing, trying his best not to slur and give away the stitches in his tongue.

It gestured for him to go. He did. At first he ran, but it was clear the Umbra could not match his pace, so he slowed to a fast walk.

When he opened the doors, he saw the little bumps under the sheets right where he’d left them. He picked Nora up in one arm and struggled to get Aaron into the other, but he would not let the Umbra help. He would not let it touch them.

They were heavy, completely unconscious and not helping him at all in supporting their weight, but he couldn’t let it help. They Umbra would never touch his children.

When they got back to the yard, the line was long – too long. There was no way Cedric could hold them that long. He started walking to the front. He didn’t figure anyone would object to him going ahead of them.

He was still far from the front when he felt his arms giving out. He wouldn’t make it, but he had to. He felt his knees buckling. He was about to fall, but he felt Nora’s weight removed from his arms. He turned, ready to fight, ready to take her back and collapse from the effort, but when he turned, it was John.

The two did not speak, could not speak. They just walked, carrying Cedric’s children, to the front of the line. They were escorted to the machine bank. They watched as soldiers, nurses, and others were loaded into the machines. They saw them close their eyes for what could be the last time.

Suddenly, Cedric was next. John handed Nora back to him and he staggered toward the machines. He laid her down on one of the slabs and put Aaron on one to the right, but left an empty one in the middle for himself. He wanted to be beside both of them.

The Umbra moved to attach the nodes, but he blocked their path.

“No,” he said, being careful to sound normal.

He turned and attached the nodes to his children himself, giving each of them a kiss on the forehead when it was done.

Then he lay down on the machine in between them and motioned for the Umbra to attach his nodes. He stared at the light directly above him, relegating the Umbra to the shadows of his periphery. He was suddenly aware of the lack of hands all over him. They were done, ready to put him to sleep. He looked to his right, at Aaron, and to his left, at Nora, then to the light over his head and closed his eyes.

The light glowed red through his lids for a second, a minute, he wasn't sure, but he could hear the machine humming through the nodes on his temples and amplified within the shell that held his head.

He thought of the plan, of waking, going down to the Gulf. He thought of seeing his children's eyes open again. He felt his fists clench. *He would do it. It would work.*

The machine started to hum faster, they started to blend together until it sounded as if he were spinning. It got louder, faster. The red glow of the light disappeared.

Whirring, clicking, whirling, clicking – silence. The silence was piercing, nearly ringing in his ears. Then he heard his mother cry.

“He's not breathing,” she said. “Why isn't he breathing?”

A baby wailed in the background and his mother cried for joy. How is he, Greg?

“Cute,” his father said. “And loud, like his momma.”

BOOK THREE TO COME